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Although superficially the prospects for metropolitan government in the United States are still dismissed as politically whimsical, latent forces are at work that bring structural regional reform back on the public agenda. Not only is there a resurgence of scholarly interest, but more importantly, major economic and political considerations both argue for new coalitions encouraging metropolitan collaboration. Persistent inequities and redundancy in local government and the need to adopt global perspectives suggest that genuine changes may be underway.

Once More Into The Breach

At this point in time—as they say in Star Wars—but more precisely in the evasiveness that is the trademark of the 1996 national elections—to suggest the creation of a fourth level of American government for metropolitan regions seems manifestly ridiculous. Never, at least since anti-Federalist days, has the fervor of grassroots and state rights ideology burned more brightly. And never has the slash and burn strategy to decimate the half-century pattern of interdependent American federalism waxed so strong. David Walker, author of *The Rebirth of Federalism: Slouching Towards Washington*, has coined the term “conflicted federalism.” It is an apt characterization of the desire to cut domestic national programs ruthlessly and to replenish political vigor at state and local levels. The two great laws of timing and momentum suggest that everywhere the public sector is down and the private sector is up, especially as the Clinton administration shuffles rightward and declares “the era of big government over.” And what remains in the

public sector is resolutely “devolving.”

Yet manifest appearances do not always coincide with latent realities. Beneath the surface of an apparently relentless and at times mean-spirited drive to cut or eliminate domestic programs that our three levels of government have carried out together since the Eisenhower era, are some powerful, albeit almost subterranean, countervailing forces. These suggest that shrinking the Beltway, and eliminating the national deficit are not sufficient strategies to meet present inescapable demands for public action.

Stipulate that the 1994 revolt against national policy took place in many program areas and that the devolution to states and localities seems ordained. It does not follow that “conflicted federalism” (or “ambivalent federalism,” as Walker later amended his analysis) as it has emerged can successfully carry out expanded responsibilities without structural reform. Under present circumstances, the case for the resurgence of metropolitan political institutions situated between the conventional tiers of state and local governance may well be stronger than at any time since the modern post-World War II movement of metropolitan reform began.

So the prescient Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California at Berkeley reported this year, as it honored the first Metropolitan scholar Victor Jones, and proclaimed “Metro Government Returns to the Political Science Research Agenda.”

The sections that follow summarize the painful history of past attempts to build regional governments and the mistakes made in these efforts over the past fifty years. Acknowledging the embarrassing failure of the “metro-or-bust” movement, they go on to ask the obvious questions: Why again? Why now? They proceed to suggest an agenda relevant to our times. Finally, they suggest a new politics and program of reform that—just possibly—may signal an idea whose time has come and a momentum sufficient to build an evolution, if not a revolution, in the direction of more metropolitan governance.

Lessons from the Past

The impetus for metropolitan institutions that emerged after World War II was essentially a product of private sector leaders with big city stakes. In the view of downtown department store owners and commercial developers, investments in the central city were imperiled by the explosive post war subur-

ban migration and the concomitant rise of the suburban shopping center. Having spent almost a half century promoting the internal reform of local government to ape the private corporation—the city manager movement—business reformers, once again in the name of efficiency and order, went forward to rationalize the new and expanding metropolitan regions.

Appalled by the duplication of functions and overlapping bureaucracy at the local level, entranced by the apparent success of our Canadian neighbors in Toronto, civic leaders in St. Louis, Cleveland, Boston, Nashville, and Maine charged ahead in the crusade for metropolitan reform. Except for Miami—with a “jelly-fish” political structure, as contemporary scholars somewhat contemptuously observed, and in danger of being overwhelmed by migration from the North and the Caribbean—the post-war reforms failed. In the Sixties, there were partial success stories in Nashville-Davidson County and Jacksonville-Duval County mergers, and shared-power arrangements in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, and Portland, Oregon experiments. But currently the latest reports there stress a stand-still or fall-back posture.

More significantly, the thrust for regional collaboration and cooperation received a powerful impetus from the Federal government in the 1966 Housing and Urban Development Act. Councils of Government that began as clearing houses in voluntary associations were now required to review and comment on Federal grant applications from local and state governments. Their numbers multiplied tenfold between 1960 and 1980, reaching 660 before the Reagan administration shifted review authority to the states, and 131 regional councils went out of business. That most councils held on is a tribute to their ability and their diplomacy, but few today have any pretensions of governing in any authoritative way (Walker, 1995).

What the process of metropolitan development made clear in the 1980s was that the private sector was in charge, or, more precisely, the private land developer. Large-scale development entrepreneurs charged through what Neal Peirce has called “the governance gap” that Joel Garreau identified and enthusiastically praised in his book *Edge City*. These new configurations are, in Garreau’s words, “a creation of the market place and commercial real estate agents are its most devoted acolytes.” Chewing up undeveloped suburban land in great bites, clumping some in patterns of clusters of jobs and homes to replace the Levittown sprawl, threatening to swallow up the countryside around

the three hundred plus metropolitan areas, accelerated sprawl became the order of the day. Simultaneously, the Reagan/Bush administrations withdrew local direct aid, which dropped from 29 percent in 1978 to 13 percent in 1991 (Walker, 1995).

Whatever restraints the public sector had imposed on the massive private sector transformation in metropolitan land uses largely disappeared. Only here and there—as for example, in such spectacular assaults on treasured Virginia battlefields by Disney Historical Parks—did timely public intervention prevail. And there once again the Federal intervention was critical, a subject to which we will later return.

To be sure, there has been a public sector counterattack to private sector dominance mounted by a few states, and proceeding under the policy tag of “growth management.” Initiated in the generally progressive states of Florida, Maine, Oregon and New Jersey, growth management is a state-directed effort to encourage comprehensive planning and land use, and, replace defensive planning of twenty years ago with positive efforts. Its aim is to ensure, in the words of John DeGrove, Director of the Center for Urban and Environmental Studies at Florida Atlantic University, “consistency, concurrence and compactness in land controls and regulation in metropolitan areas.”

These initiatives reflect the general revitalization of state governments in the last thirty years—in particular their enhanced capacity to plan and to oversee the programs first initiated in Washington. It yields to the states the role of what Walker has called “the authoritative map makers for sub-state regions in rural and metropolitan America.”

Yet, Walker adds, it is “a role some would like to ignore.” Indeed such is the new dominance in most state legislatures of suburban lawmakers, and such is the compulsion of most governors to attract metropolitan support, that the necessary links between central city and suburbs are weak and stretched tight. They are also often contradictory and contentious. In short, reformed state governments and emerging growth management policy strategies are hopefully harbingers of attention—but their effectiveness is yet to be demonstrated.

Why Again? Why Now?

If devolution from nation to state to local runs at flood tide, the national presence—so critical in the encouragement of metropolitan political evolu-

tion—appears about to be swept away, and state efforts to fill the gap are not proven yet, how can we take new proposals for reform seriously? To quote Walker again: “We face academic cacophony...theoretical harmony is more elusive than ever; more theories are in vogue as to how metro areas should be run...the many faces of reform have produced little real reform at any time.”

The Scribblers

Nonetheless, there are new stirrings to be taken into account—on the academic, media, and, more importantly, on the economic and political fronts. Academically, Samuel Beer’s *To Make A Nation: The Rediscovery of American Federalism* reminded us in 1993, that the basic principles of the Founding Fathers were nationalism and democracy and that they were derived from sources as ancient as Thomas Aquinas, John Milton, and James Harrington. He further emphasized that these commitments have prevailed whenever seriously challenged, whether by the Civil War or the contemporary Congress. The journalist’s impulse for a regionalism that acknowledges the national interest became clear in the same year of the publication of Beer’s book, when Pierce, with Curtis Johnson and John Hall, wrote *Citistates*.

The Lincoln Land Institute in Cambridge and the McCormack Institute at the University of Massachusetts in Boston are both determined to revisit the issue. Anthony Downes of the Brookings Institute weighed in last year with his *New Visions for Metropolitan America*. David Rusk, a successful Tucson mayor and an astute national observer, argues flat out for suburban annexation to the central city in *Cities Without Suburbs*. This year David Walker’s superb treatment of the issue in *The Rebirth of Federalism* provides the data and reasoning to make Beer’s political philosophy operative. He lists 17 approaches to regionalism in ascending order of political difficulty—from informed cooperation to three-tier reform, and through the documents on how slow the process has been, he underscores the economic if not political imperatives.

Academics can be dismissed in the short run, but in the long run theirs are the ideas that fill the wells of policy. When they resurface as they do now, they suggest that new metropolitan governing structures in expanding urban regions may indeed be an idea whose time has come. At least the idea is here—and widely disseminated.

But precisely what are the powerful latent forces that the scribblers have ferreted out? Three are economic and three are political—and taken together they appear powerful incentives to reform.

Economic Pressures

First, as the early analyses of the 1990 census makes clear, metropolitan sprawl continues unabated. Henry Richmond—a prime mover in Portland, Oregon, in its successful creation of a broad urban region—summarizes the prime demographic attribution of the metropolitan transition from 1950 to 1990 in an important paper of the National Growth Management Leadership Project. He cites an increase from 56 to 78 percent of total U.S. population, with the 39 largest metropolitan areas accounting for 51 percent. More dramatically, he highlights the lowering of residential densities: in the San Francisco metropolitan area dropping from 8.2 acres per unit in 1975 to 5.8 today. During a comparable period Baltimore saw an increase from 1/5 acre to 2/3 of an acre—a change of 350 percent. Land area since 1960 in Chicago, New York, District of Columbia/Baltimore, Dallas, Fort Worth, Atlanta, and San Francisco, he reports grew to 4-8 times more than population. He projects a 20-30 year capacity for accommodating future growth and development within the (imaginary) perimeter of these Edge City-dominated freeway-connected metro regions.

Second, the pressure of speculation in land values at the metropolitan fringe (as the Lincoln Land Institute has shown) establishes that the land price to the individual home owner consumer over the last thirty years has increased three times faster than the consumer price index. Since land costs now exceed one-quarter of the total cost of the typical housing unit, the case grows stronger for a contemporary version of Henry George's site value plan taxation advanced almost a century ago. A modification of his proposal to tax the site at its highest potential use may well bring about, if not the "highest and best use of land," at least a better use.

The metropolitan citizen not only pays for the inflated land encouraged by local restrictive zoning. He or she pays as well in the costs of automobile-dominated transportation, extended public utilities infrastructure and lack of critical mass in the provision of ordinary public services—policy, fire, health, and education. Walker estimates at least 51 percent (42,565) of all local gov-

ernments to be nonviable, given their population size. And Downes, in his *New Visions for Metropolitan America*, keys the capacity to control land speculation and put effective infrastructure in place to area wide governance or regional government.

Third, the devolution drive now underway places special economic burdens on metropolitan suburb and central city alike. In the words of the late Paul Ylvisaker, the shifting burden of taxes previously borne by the Federal government to the states in the 1980s was shifted again this time to localities in the 90s. So the costs of “nonviable” local units rose rapidly, and it is the property tax in local jurisdictions across the nation that is now under assault. In New Jersey, the *New York Times* reports a “lock step” between state tax cuts and local increases in the property tax. I reported in a 1994 *State Tax Note* that where limitations on the local ability to raise these taxes are imposed as in Propositions 2½ and 13 in Massachusetts and California, the fall-out usually appeared in the increase in state borrowing. Hence, the metropolitan mosaic, revered in the name of grassroots democracy and home ownership of single-family detached dwellings imposes substantial costs to the individual in her/his shelter, transportation, and redundant public facilities and services. In a time of economic stringencies, these costs are surfacing rapidly.

They also rise unfairly, especially where local schools are concerned. Despite three generations of so-called state equalization policies, aimed at providing compensatory state support for poor districts with great needs and making local tax effort greater, the disparities among the 16,000 local school districts in the U.S. continues to grow. The “typical” school district is suburban, middle class, mostly white, mostly college bound. It is that district on which state aid formulas understandably focus. It is that model that attracts 91 percent of all new teachers while only 9 percent with urban commitments sign on with the big city schools.

Accordingly, the “crisis” in education identified first by the “Big Three” reports in 1983—“A Nation at Risk,” “Making the Grade,” “Action for Excellence”—has deepened, especially in the urban core. Localism wins out over national professional standards.

Political Pressures

The trade-offs between political ideology and political reality are always tricky ones—whether played out internationally or on the national, state, and local levels. The tradition of local autonomy began in colonial times, and states' rights reached a zenith in the Civil War. Now, in the contemporary call for devolution, ideology might appear to be winning again.

But, the concept of “non-viable governments,” by reason of population size, and economies of scale, is arresting. Given the economic pressures now at work, three political consequences appear.

Local governments are increasingly ineffective in responding to rising costs and managing land uses, except by means of negative strategies, such as NIMBYS (Not in My Back Yard). They cannot control costs except by imposing restrictive land uses that might place additional stress on property taxes.

State government uses of growth management policies are not only still in the experimental stages, but they frequently have an abrasive impact on difficult inner city-suburban relations. They shy away from shifting resources to the core city or encouraging economic development there.

Major regional development policies are being made more and more by nondemocratic authoritarian institutions, specifically by transportation authorities and by courts. Key issues in environmental well-being as well as in education and housing are now increasingly placed in unrepresentative hands. The legislative and executive, as general instruments of government, have failed to address the key concerns of metropolitan citizens, and the courts and the authorities make more policy that fundamentally shapes the quality of metropolitan life.

The effective, responsive arenas for providing genuine relief to metropolitan citizens and communities alike should be area-wide metropolitan government. In the Downes formulation, this implies the establishment of real boundary lines at the edges of urban growth, increased reliance on mass transit, strong inducements for job creation in the urban core, and real property taxation—cum housing subsidy—with more than a touch of Henry George's tilt toward site value.

Why would politicians and public, in the era of anti-government, consider metropolitan regional arrangements now? Carefully advanced from a bully pulpit, the proposition makes sense primarily because of the intensification of

the old pressures and the emergence of new ones just now surfacing.

The old pressures, already identified, return to the agenda of the 1950s—unnecessary costs by duplication and redundancy of localities so small they violate every concept of rational organization. With the “filter down” of tax burdens to the grassroots, the increasing disposition to approve limits on property assessments and the difficulty in restraining local budgets, especially for schools, the cost “thing” takes on new urgency.

New pressures reinforce the old ones. The political psychological set of the 1990s is clearly new: The angry middle-class Joe and Jill six-pack family has had it with the political elite. Balanced budgets and term limits are contemporary expressions of throwing the rascals out, and they threaten the political careers of incumbents at all levels of government, especially states. The disposition to change partners, properly articulated and orchestrated, can be persuasive.

The last metro reform effort in Massachusetts twenty years ago went forward almost solely on the grounds of cost savings. It never touched the nerve of inadequate performance of local and state level programs and institutions. While it did call for a single metropolitan representative body to include elected members of the 101 communities, it did not exclude current incumbents. The notion of creating an entirely new set of metropolitan leaders might now attract candidates from the state and local levels to aspire to new offices and tap a new pool of the discontented and the foresighted. In short, the disillusionment, discontent, and itch for change that galvanized the 1994 Congressional election might also be applied to the “Fourth Tier crusade.”

More than the disaffection that inspires revolutions over taxation are present. There are deep disaffections with public authorities, especially with the courts and with education. Until metropolitan approaches are offered to overcome the constraints of the Millikan decision in the ultraconservative court of the 1970s,—which excluded suburbs from any responsibility for school desegregation by a five to four vote—the inequities of schooling among jurisdictions will continue to tempt both state and federal courts to action. When major infrastructure investments force tolls and user fees to pop up unexpectedly, the aloof—at times overbearing—port and turnpike authorities may lose prestige. A new set of actors, respected, well-funded, and committed can provide a different vision for the metropolitan future.

That vision should include more than property tax relief, effective oversight of land use, incentive for balanced transportation, and appeal of environmental health and quality. It needs to encompass Sam Beer's recent reminder to us all that however many tiers exist in our Federal system, they must encompass national aims of "liberty and union." They must seek "self government for the many." In Beer's words, the founders saw the American nation as a body "whose basic unit was not kindred, clan, or corporate community but the individual. This nation or individuals, nonetheless, was united by bonds as strong as those constituting the old organic order."

What the metropolitan, regional, new government institution can provide is that dimension of union that we need desperately at the present time. As the waves of immigrants continue to break upon us—and produce ugly, intolerant, mean reactions—the need for a forum of dialogue, exchange of views, debate, and compromise among the many disparate groups that make up the metropolitan community moves from a desirable conclusion to becoming a necessity. How we restore to our common culture the dimensions of civility and tolerance is the most compelling requirement of our national life today. The most pressing domestic issue of our time may well be how to transform violent confrontation, individual or group, into constructive encounter. Neither the city nor suburb nor edge city can bring this peace about within their own boundaries. But a metropolitan governance overseeing a metropolitan community can.

Besides a generalized call for "metropolitanism," there are some specific options that can emerge, without repeating the complicity of the 1950 efforts.

First, especially in the west and south, the county retains a viable and active local government with a larger geographical base, capable of expansion, either by annexation or consolidation with central cities.

Second, where counties are not viable, as in New England and the Middle Atlantic states, the Council of Governments approach, initiated in the sixties, can be revived.

Third, the largely autonomous authorities can be civilized by establishing advisory bodies and review processes with genuine clout to oversee the basic infrastructure investments now necessary across the country.

Finally, state legislatures traditionally wary of metropolitan reform can themselves be placed in the role of conveyors of regional approaches as the

growth management states have shown.

The task now is to fit options to the conditions and cultures of the particular metropolitan region involved. There may be no cookie-cutter, one size fits all solution, but every day the search for a genuine metropolitan community becomes more compelling.

Suggested Readings

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