DEVOLUTION VS. REGIONALIZATION OF POWER IN BRITAIN AND THE USA: THE CONSEQUENCES FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

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Abstract: The failure of experiments with both neighborhood government and regional government has led to attempts to weld these two administrative formats. The result is the federated local authority. The urban planning function in London, England, is utilized as an example to show the failure of the federated authority concept due to its dependence on a metropolitan spirit among its citizens and on a strict division in decision-making between area and local concerns. Neither is attainable so the experiment fails at least in regard to citizen expectations concerning involvement. The proposed solution involves a weaker role for the borough or neighborhood units in the federation and an effort to support and encourage citizen involvement in decision-making via the political process. Disparities in political resources are rectified by recourse to “watchdog” groups to balance the growing power of technocratic planners.

For many years, two major administrative concepts have developed which have captured a wide and often enthusiastic following. One concept concerns the desire of citizen groups for a larger share in decision-making with regard to their own geographic community; the other concept concerns the demands by many public officials that governmental decision-making structures correspond to the functional metropolitan area. In short, many citizen groups are pressing for a devolution of power away from city hall and towards the neighborhoods, while on the other hand public officials and planners argue that units of governmental authority should grow larger in order to correspond to the needs of our burgeoning urbanized environment.

Clearly these two concepts are uneasy bedfellows. In fact, they often appear to be diametrically opposed; proponents of neighborhood control stress virtues such as personal contact, participatory democracy, citizen education, and community; while proponents of regional authorities stress the technical, administrative and economic efficiency of large scale operations, the inherent rationality of more centralized decision-making, the need to pool resources and avoid the wasteful conflict and overlap inherent in small jurisdictions1).

Neighborhood Government

The conflict between these two concepts is well advanced both in Britain and the United States. In Britain Michael Young and the Association for Neighborhood Councils have lobbied long and hard for a distinct neighborhood based tier of local government with decision-making authority. In this country, Kotler, Yates and Hallman are well known as proponents of a similar cause.

Regional Government

On the other side, American sources like the National Commission on Urban Problems contend that more power must be given to regional bodies similar to the Regional Planning Commissions and Councils of Government already in existence2). In Britain, J. MacKintosh and others have long argued for some kind of regional tier of authority3). Indeed, a minority report to the Maud Commission on Local Government made just such a recommendation in 19694).

The Failure of Neighborhood Autonomy

The problem with these two concepts is that experience has shown that both are unworkable. The relative failure of attempts to decentralize control of public programs has been amply documented5). Although there is no agreement on the reasons for this failure, one of the major reasons cited is that political participation in a given area is related to class, income, and family history rather than specific types of governmental structure. In addition, many observers feel that neighborhood control of public programs could have a balkanizing effect on service delivery and planning. In any case, they feel that experiments in community autonomy such as the Community Action program evidenced just as much detachment from the local populace as did the local governing structure. On the other hand one


2) Building the American City. Report of the National Commission on Urban Problems. 91st Congress, 1st Session, No. 91–34. See Chapter I, Part IV.


5) In a recent study, Yin and Yates say, “Our survey of decentralization research revealed that the major outcomes of decentralization innovation were increased information between

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major school of thought holds that while recent attempts to decentralize control of public programs did fail, this failure is attributable to the fact that these attempts were not meaningful. In short they say we have not actually ever tried real decentralization\(^6\). Be this as it may, it is safe to say that largely due to our past experiences, there is today a decreased public interest in decentralization schemes\(^7\).

**The Failure of Regional Authority**

If the neighborhood is being eschewed as a locus for power, the region is faring little better. There are a host of political reasons why the drive for a regional level of authority appears to be stalled. Specifically, there is strong voter resistance to city-county consolidation due to the effect of social differentiation and racial factors\(^8\). Indeed, urban black voters are often quite skeptical of the value of metropolitanization and its effect on their bloc voting strength\(^9\). In addition, metropolitan reorganization schemes fail to attract sufficient voter interest since they are often promulgated by a small group of interested reformers rather than grass roots organizations. Finally, most metropolitan reorganization proposals must be voted on at the local and state levels thereby forcing the proposal to pass muster in two political constituencies with differing political interests\(^10\).

There are also obstacles which concern the functional efficacy of such a unit of authority. Specifically, recent studies of American experiments in regional government have produced little evidence of improved governmental performance. Indeed, the reverse is the case since findings show that: few scale economies are produced, delivery of tangible goods is stressed over social problem resolution, no redistributive effects on power or wealth can be shown, reduced rates of citizen participation are common, and little movement toward a metropolitan consciousness can be discerned. It must be emphasized here that such findings should not be viewed as definitive since for the most part American experiments in regional reform entail modest rather than major structural changes\(^11\).

In any case, the main obstacle is the fear that a regional unit of authority would be remote to the vast majority of citizens. Such remoteness would be compounded by the tendency of such units to rely on a host of expert, technocratic decision-makers often far removed from the arena of neighborhood concerns\(^12\). As a result the movement towards regionalization of authority appears becalmed at present.

**The Federated Approach**

Attempts have been made to weld these two conflicting positions into a workable pattern of local government. Specifically, suggestions center around the advocacy of a two tier federated system similar to the one enacted for British cities in 1974. Perhaps the most famous example of such a system is London\(^13\). The local government of London is divided by geographic area and by function. The Greater London Council or GLC oversees area wide functions of an overbounded metropolitan area. Locally oriented functions are controlled by each of the 32 boroughs.

**The Federated Approach and the Planning Function**

Perhaps the best way to illustrate just how this relationship between the G.L.C. and the individual boroughs works would be to utilize the example of the urban planning function. I

\(^{6}\) Yin and Yates, p. 174.

\(^{7}\) Yin and Yates, p. 177. Another reason for this decreased interest is the realization that neighborhood autonomy can heighten internecine conflicts to a paralytic extent.


\(^{9}\) R. Lineberry, "It is Better to Have Reformed and Lost Than Never to Have Reformed at All -- or Is It?" in Campbell and Bahl, p. 21.

\(^{10}\) Marando in Campbell and Bahl, p. 39.


\(^{13}\) The Government of London was reorganized in 1963.