

"Regionalism in the Countryside"

Dr. Edward L. Henry*

The original title for my assigned address was "Rural Regionalism." Let me define the terms we are using. I use "rural" in a sense more useful (to me) to mean those areas that are outside the major metropolitan areas of a state. The term "countryside" rather than "rural" is preferable (to me) since "rural" still has the connotation of "farm" country to many, whereas the word "countryside" better represents whatever lies out there including farms, but also the more numerous and growing non-farm population. "Regionalism" I use somewhat loosely to cover a variety of new forms of social organization designed to achieve common treatment of a problem or performance of a service over a larger geographical area than existed previously. This may cover cooperative endeavors between adjacent local units of government; assumption by a larger unit of government of functions formerly performed by lesser ones; establishment of multi-county regions by statutory enactment; or bundling together of service areas or functions by Federal agencies. I am sure that the definition of "regionalism" alone could exhaust our allotted time on this program.

* Mayor of Saint Cloud, Minnesota and Director of the Center for the Study of Local Government at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota; an address for the National Service to Regional Councils, Fourth Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, March 16, 1970.

We are living in an age of revolutions. Man's trip to the moon merely dramatizes a whole host of breakthroughs that are difficult to comprehend. Jet aircraft, computers, new drugs, Aswan dams, nuclear submarines all come tumbling out of our laboratories with such consistency that we begin to take them for granted. On the other hand, we are still struggling with maddening slowness to solve problems of racial relations; problems of international warfare; problems of antiquated social structures. Our social inventiveness lags considerably behind our scientific genius, and it is frustrating because the scientific discoveries help generate control problems that require social inventiveness.

Governmental institutions are a case in point. If we concede that social institutions (like government) are society's response in any particular time-place period of history to the social problems of that period, then one must concede also that as the nature of the problem changes, the institutions as a response to that problem probably ought to change too. Our federal structure of government, for instance, was designed to meet the particular problems of thirteen former colonies of Britain newly freed by the American Revolution. The need was for unity while still protecting the jealous individual sovereignty of each of the colonies. Common problems would be handled by the central government while retaining sovereignty over local ones. But common problems were few and each state had more than adequate jurisdictional control over the rest of its problems.

In discussing regionalism here today, we are talking of a potential new response to new social problems. The old federalism in many respects has become an outmoded answer, and in some respects an actual impediment to preferred social solutions. Perhaps we need a changed concept of "community." Problems like sprawl, pollution, land use planning, don't respect the old boundaries anymore. We must acknowledge the role that government plays in caring for the general interests of society and seek to promote its proper jurisdiction over the problem area--or at least invent new forms of cooperation amongst existing governmental units. A new type of federalist social organization is necessary if we are going to deal effectively with some of the problems raised by the scientific and population explosion. Old answers may not fit radically new problems.

Like latter day Founding Fathers, this assembly here today is really talking new solutions; new forms; new institutions--- governments included. All governments today are partially at least social anachronisms, cultural lags, obsolescent solutions. Thomas Jefferson, a government builder himself, recognized the time-bound character of social organizations when he suggested that each generation must have its own revolution. I can understand the point he was trying to make. Mutation in social institutions of which governmental organization is one occurs with painful slowness and much frustration. It is not a subject for the impatient; and this is one reason why the young today frequently seek shortcuts through confrontation and even violence.

The Problem of Low Visibility

But if institutional change, particularly of governmental forms, has to contend with the hard facts of cultural lag and political apathy in the nation at large, it seems particularly hobbled in the countryside. Here in one form or another most, if not all of the problems facing the metropolitan areas, and possibly some additional ones, are to be found. But the prognosis for solution of the countryside problems may be somewhat less optimistic than in the metropolitan areas.

There is the problem of visibility, first of all---the difficulty of achieving a clear perception of spillover and a resulting sense of urgency to deal with it. In metro areas people are needled in large numbers every day by the inconveniences of poor inter-city transit; by the unsavory results of inadequate sanitation systems; by the higher incidence of inter-jurisdictional crime; by the gnawing presence of contrasting tax burdens side by side; by the omnipresence of pollution swept across jurisdictional boundaries by wind and stream. These results of limited jurisdictional sovereignty are increasingly sculpted in base relief by the metropolitan news media thus arousing the more dynamic, discontented, and better organized interest group structure of macro-city to the attack.

In the countryside, on the other hand, the congestion and spillover is not so evident; the geographical distances between jurisdictions become psychological moats; a brain drain

tends to remove the natural leaders; and the dynamics of social interaction so necessary for change operates on a very low key.

Indeed, the metropoli of the nation are better equipped than the countryside not only to recognize their problems but to marshall the resources of the country to combat them. Social science research in recent years has recognized the agonizing plight of the large metropolitan centers. Federal and state agencies and private foundations have poured funds into these "macro-cities" in an effort to delineate the nature of their problems and seek effective solutions. New Federal agencies like HUD, DOT, and HEW are skewed better to the needs of the metropoli both by virtue of statutory and administrative directives and because of the interests and training of their bright young recruits educated for the most part within the context of the larger urban centers. On the other hand, the traditional champion of the rural areas, the Department of Agriculture, has until very recently been reluctant to re-examine its role and redefine its constituency. It is still battling to achieve some measure of freedom from its historical clientele. And like many older agencies, it has exhibited a sluggishness in shifting its resources that has given some strategic advantage to its younger contemporaries--HUD, DOT, HEW, and OEO--agencies with a metropolitan bias.

Agency Overlap Problems

Half a dozen Federal agencies, however, have now addressed themselves to the problems of the countryside, and we have seen

a spate of attempts to establish coordinative structures among the field agencies. Reminiscent of the early days of the New Deal, we have a number of alphabetical programs going: CAA, RC&D, RAD, TAPS, CDA's, OEDP's, CAMP's, CEP's, LDD's, and NMD's. Local government officials are finding it difficult even to remember what the abbreviations represent. Many of these efforts overlap geographically and substantively, and there is undoubtedly some duplication of functions and effort. The latest overlay of regions comes with the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 out of which has come additional grouping of blocks of counties for purpose of coordinating the fight on crime. As Sundquist and Davis of the Brookings Institution point out in their provocative study on federalism just published:* "rival agencies have presented separate and even conflicting schemes for community organization." The authors document well what many frustrated countryside officials have already experientially concluded: namely, that the maze of regional efforts launched by the agencies are confusing and wasteful, if not chaotic.

So far there has been very limited success in achieving some kind of uniformity in the definition of the regions sponsored by these agencies. Nor have we made much headway in getting them to coincide with State regions established by our legislatures. President Johnson, by executive order during his term, instructed Federal agencies to adjust to State regions wherever possible, and

* Sundquist and Davis, Making Federalism Work, [Brookings Institution, 1969]

President Nixon has indicated a desire to make the Federal regions themselves more rational. But we seem some time away from a matching of Federal and State regions, not to mention an interlocking of programs. Perhaps we need another Hoover Commission to study the field organizations of the major departments in an effort to induce more rational structuring.

There is another problem efforts to establish regionalism face in the countryside. If we are to build a new form of area-wide organization, then the building blocks must be solid. Political scientists look with dismay upon the archaic structure of county and township governments designed to meet the needs of a by-gone day when not much was demanded or expected of government. Founded on Jacksonian postulates of democracy and exhibiting an historical fear of concentrated power, such governmental units are without executive leadership, and their functions and powers tend to be indiscriminately scattered across a dozen elected officials. Even in the municipalities where the weak-mayor form of government predominates, provision for such leadership is generally lacking.

Absence of a Professional Bureaucracy

Most important of all is the virtual absence of a trained, professional bureaucracy that can intelligently and continuously needle elected, part-time officials into recognizing long-term problems; pore over solutions with fellow professionals across jurisdictional lines; and develop sophisticated techniques in

devising solutions. Most governmental units in the countryside are too small to engage good professionals even if the elected bureaucracy is willing to give way to them. And when a pool of talent does develop out there, too often a brain drain reaction occurs to dissipate it. This lacunae of trained professionals at the local level is, perhaps, the single biggest problem faced by the units in the countryside. And it is a very fundamental barrier to such governments in participating effectively in Federal and State programs designed to help them.

Yet, withal, the countryside must continue grappling with the problem of inter-governmental and regional organization whatever form this might take. Regional planning for landuse, pollution control, recreational development, crime control, water resource use, sanitary collection systems, health care, manpower training, industrial development, water runoff, transportation, airport construction, joint libraries use, these and other problems all demand some kind of defined boundaries and some kind of organizational form to operate or coordinate. Historically, we have evaded these measures by a variety of devices: for instance, by simply tolerating high costs and low quality in government; or by closing our eyes; or by simply moving away. Our cushion in many respects has disappeared. The frontier is closed on what we thought were inexhaustible resources of land, timber, water and minerals. Wastage today may not be solved by moving on to the next lode. Thin tax resources coupled with increasingly sophisticated appetites in the countryside do not permit the luxury of parochialism any longer.

Area-Wide Approaches

What forms will eventually crystallize to meet these new needs and how the distribution of functions will be made between existing units of government and possible new forms is anybody's guess. Local Councils of Government will surely survive to meet more finite common problems between adjacent governmental units. Special districts and contracted services seem destined for increase. Counties, if they can achieve more viability, will probably assume a larger burden of services than formerly, particularly from the declining township system, but even from municipalities. And counties themselves will group for services as they are now doing for libraries. Larger regions for diversified planning purposes established by State Legislatures or by gubernatorial executive order will become popular. Annexation will expand jurisdictional integrity of larger municipalities in some instances. Federal agency districts may eventually be brought into harmony with state-established ones. And huge districts like Appalachia and the Upper Great Lakes Region may be replicated for even broader planning in recognition of the fact that even the states themselves as planning areas have insufficient jurisdictional capacity. Thus, the old face of Federalism will gradually give way to a new one with the older Federal-State-Local divisions supplemented with new organizational and coordinative forms.

Necessary Conditions for Regionalism

Groping along the path to a working regionalism will be a tedious job entailing much repetition of the trial and error method now underway. The following requisites for successful regionalism seem desirable.

(1) Local governmental units as building blocks must be made viable. James Bryce, British scholar and statesman, looking at the United States from a visitor's perspective, commented in a classic study that "in no area of effort has America failed so signally as in its local government." Some levels of local government are little different from when Bryce looked them over at the beginning of this century. It is unlikely, however, that they are going to disappear except for those township governments surrounding existing municipalities, and numerous small school districts. We might just as well conclude therefore that we must proceed apace with conventional policies for making them better. This is particularly true for those growth centers in the countryside that will become focal points for the regions. These are absolutely vital for the rebirth of the non-metropolitan areas.

(2) Sufficient permissive state legislation for formation of multi-governmental units or inter-governmental contracting should be enacted. One should recall that local governments are creatures of the states and possess only those powers explicitly granted to them. State statutes should also be examined to see what strings have to be cut to allow creative reaction by such units to the problems that are generating the cry for broader action on country-side problems.

(3) The lacunae of insufficient staffing for regional organizations should be filled promptly. Such staffing might be attached directly to the regional organizations established by the states or federal agencies; it might be made available through enlarged State Planning Agencies; or it might come through tapping colleges within each region for skilled manpower. The latter approach holds real potential, and community research centers, "rurban observatories", should be encouraged within or between these institutions of higher education. They are hungry for participation in community problem-solving and in the face of a rising chorus of demand from students and faculty for relevance and involvement can serve their own internal needs simultaneously. Chairs for the study of rural poverty should be established to care for the needs of a constituency hitherto unrepresented in the college. Non-degreed, para-professionals with social skills should also be added to college staffs to help achieve communication with the outside community.

(4) Federal and state governments should place greater emphasis upon block grants in stimulating programmatic action in the countryside. The capability of small, rural governments to meet conditions of categorical aids varies from unit to unit. Many cannot qualify, or even put together proposals to apply. Regional councils utilizing staff assistance possibly in the form of local institutions of higher education should be made responsible for the application for funds including proposal writing. Such units

would be accountable for the disposition of funds and for supervision over projects.

The infra-structure for such services already is present in the colleges. Such college centers through educational grant programs are already familiar with the mechanics. Thus, the governmental units in the countryside could borrow bureaucratic skills to serve their purposes. The local councils could adapt federal program requirements to the specific needs and abilities of local units of government, and gradually bring the skills of local officials to a point where more discretion and initiative might be assumed by them. Side by side would go pressures for more intergovernmental approaches to common problems---surely an educational job at which the colleges ought to be quite proficient.

This kind of a crutch might be the vehicle for solving the present incapacities of the countryside in many instances to take advantage of federal programs designed to help them. It visualizes a new social role for country colleges, but one which can enrich both them and the social environment in which they exist.

(5) State governments will wish to re-examine their own commitments towards regionalism and increasingly utilize the carrot-stick approach in the extension of loans or grants-in-aid to existing local units of government. This has become a practical strategy on the part of the Federal government, and in some states. Airport construction, pollution control, and crime abatement seem the most likely areas for the initial development of such strategies.

(6) The Chief Executive of each state and his Planning Agency arm have got to become educators and shapers of public opinion along with the universities. Pulling local units into regional organizations by the scruff of their necks seems a less fruitful method than voluntary compliance. It certainly also appears to be fraught with political risk, something governors like to keep in mind. If education works slowly, perhaps a little greasing of the wheels with carrot juice can make forward-looking intellectuals out of a lot of local officials in a relatively short time.

(7) Acceptance by state legislative bodies of an explicit goal of countryside revival can act to induce rationality and consistency in state agency policies that bear upon such renewal. In this revival, regionalism may be given a priority position that can help reduce contradictory policies to a minimum.

Regionalism Serves a National Need

The concept of "regionalism", however one defines it, is intimately tied in today with one of our great domestic problems--- demographic imbalance. This imbalance threatens to grow worse as we seek living space for another 80 million citizens by the end of the century. So far the great bulk of these new citizens seem destined for the large cities of the nation.

Yet, in the countryside the number of farms is back to what it was in 1870. Hundreds of counties are still losing population. In Minnesota, for instance, from 1960 to 1966 only

34 of the 87 counties held their own or grew. This population drift has aggravated the existing difficulties of local government to provide by themselves the level of public services that people with increasingly sophisticated appetites are demanding. Traditional disparities in the amenities of life between the metropolis and the countryside have to be overcome if any resettlement policy is to succeed. Yet, most existing governmental units in the country appear too small to achieve economies of scale that can cut costs and raise quality. Half of our municipalities are under 1,000 residents in size and 60 per cent of our counties have less than 25,000 residents. It seems possible that regionalism may be able to do jointly for them in this regard what individual units cannot do singly. But much remains to be researched on this subject before we can draw solid conclusions. The whole question of what size permits economies of scale is the currently most popular parlor game amongst urbanologists.

Locational Laissez Faire

It does appear that the Nation sooner or later will have to decide whether it wishes to continue what has been basically a laissez faire approach towards population movement. Many who fatalistically accept the drift to megalopolis as inevitable and uncontrollable, refuse to accept such fatalism towards other domestic problems such as race relations, health care, or control of the business cycle. Public opinion polls have documented the aspirations of a great majority of our people to decentralize in some fashion. It is difficult to believe that a nation which populated the West in fifty years time and put a man on the moon

in ten years time should admit defeat at the prospect of getting people to move back to a countryside for which at one time their forebears fought the Indians.

I think the time will come when millions of repatriates will seek out the countryside once more. They will come equipped with all the inventions of modern science that can make living in the countryside a pleasant option. Let us hope that they will also bring new and tested concepts of social organization, a new type of federalism if you will; one that provides a better coincidence between the problems which science and population explosions have raised and the jurisdictional integrity to handle these problems.

... the time is still to come when the countryside will be a place where people will want to live. It will be a place where people will want to live because it will be a place where people will want to live.

Location of the Nation's Future

It does appear that the Nation's future is to be found in the countryside. It is a place where people will want to live because it will be a place where people will want to live. It is a place where people will want to live because it will be a place where people will want to live.

... it is difficult to believe that the Nation's future is to be found in the countryside. It is a place where people will want to live because it will be a place where people will want to live.