

SMALL CITY PROBLEMS

Transcript of talk by Dr. Edward L. Henry,  
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It is a pleasure to be here with you on this lovely warm day at this altitude and in this beautiful setting. I'm going to draw upon my favorite subject today which is one about which I guess I am prejudiced. It is my field of study academically and I guess I regarded my city (St. Cloud...where Dr. Henry was former mayor) as a social laboratory. It was a very interesting experience for me. However, I am glad to be back in academia full time.

Some people have asked me why I didn't go into politics full time and I should like to relate two anecdotes to answer that question. St. Cloud is a city somewhat like the city of Burlington. While I was mayor I went to the hospital for one thing or another and after I had been there six weeks, the Council thought it was time to take cognizance of the absence of its Mayor so they voted a resolution to wish me a speedy recovery and, of course, it passed.....four to three. I was a little chagrined at that, but I attributed it to politics. Then at the end of my first term, I decided to give it a whirl a second time and repeat the brilliant performance of my first four years. And so, I went door to door asking for support. When I came to one door and a housewife asked me what I wanted, I said, "I'm Ed Henry and I'm running for Mayor of St. Cloud." Without any hesitation, she said, "That's fine, I'll support you. I'll do anything to get rid of the guy that's in there now." I then decided to spend full time in academia.

I do want to talk to you today about one facet of "Habitat." I'm sure you have talked today about substantive problems which are the environmental problems facing the State of Vermont, and what kind of substantive policies ought to be directed to remedy them. I think though, underlying all that, there has to be some discussion paid to the role that the government has to play in any attempt to make the habitat worthy of human habitation. I think there are two concepts that are important to my thesis and I want you to keep them in the back of your mind as I talk. One is the importance of government in creating a healthy environment for moral and economic growth. There has got to be some coordinating element when people try to move in the same direction and society has invented government to do that job of coordination. Secondly, I want you to keep in mind the concept that all social institutions, including government, are subject to obsolescence and must periodically be revised.



Let's get on with the first one...the importance of the government in addressing problems of the habitat. I think the lingering ideology that we had to live with so long in this country, that government is a necessary evil, was a political corollary of laissez-faire economics. The ideology, that concept, that attitude toward government is disappearing. Of course, individualism occasionally rears its head, but pretty well in this country we have now accepted the fact that man is a social animal and that all of us have social responsibilities that we are going to have to carry if we are to have a decent society. That environment which government helps create is basic to moral growth. I'm not going to dwell on that too much, but I refer you to the theme in Plato's Republic in which he asks how we can so shape the environment (society) to bring out the best that is in man. He recognized the role the government plays in moral growth. Aristotle, too, paid heed to government and in exploring the origins of government said that men come together in order to survive and that they stayed on in cities in order to live the good life. That concept has come forward to us and we do recognize today that society as coordinated by government is necessary to humanistic growth.

In more recent times we began to recognize the great importance that government plays in economic growth. John Maynard Keynes, I think, highlighted that for us, particularly with reference to supporting employment and output. Despite the fact that Keynes' theory is under heavy attack today because stagflation seems to refute some of his cherished ideas, never-the-less, I think Keynes did point out some very important truths about the influence the government has in generating a healthy economy. We know, for instance, - and this is true at the local level too - that government helps create a supportive climate for growth. This factor provides the infrastructure of the economy - the sewer lines, the streets, the fire protection, police protection. These are essentials if you are going to have private sector growth.

Secondly, the government helps overcome the social costs of production, for instance the pollution caused by private production. That is, pollution that is both human and environmental. Government frequently has to step in and try to compensate for that or offset it. Then, of course, it compliments and supports private output through the so-called dependency factor...as private industry grows and turns out products, the automobile for instance, government has to come in and support that product. Its expenditures depend to a great extent on what private industry turns out...it provides highways, rest stops, and hospitals as complements to the private production of automobiles. Government, consequently, as an agent of society, is a basic ingredient in an orderly society. I think we do well to recognize the role it plays in helping us to lead a better life and in offsetting some of the side effects of the production of our goods and services.

Going on to my second concept, that of social obsolescence... governments are social institutions and almost all governments today reflect yesterday's response to yesterday's problems. Government



was an invention to handle problems that society faced. Our own Federal Constitution was designed to meet the problems that faced the founding fathers when the Constitution was drawn up. There are some aspects now in that Constitution, such as Federalism, that might seem to impede the efficacy of some public policies. In some states the governmental structure is worse than in others because not much change has occurred. I recall for your edification Jefferson's statement that "each generation must have its own revolution." He is saying that the type of answers you supply to the time-place set of social problems has got to change as the problems change or your solution becomes ineffective and obsolescent. I think the evolution toward obsolescence in local government may be depicted by three widely spaced observations that have been made about local government in the U.S. For one of them we go back to the 1830s and a Frenchman by the name of de Tocqueville who came over here to study the American political system and in his writings expressed a great deal of appreciation for the New England town. Let's jump ahead a little in time to James Bryce. James Bryce was an English scholar and an ambassador from England to the U.S., writing around the turn of the century. He took a little different view some seventy years later. He looked at American politics and looked at American governmental structures and commented that "in no areas have Americans failed so signally as in local government."...quite a swing away from de Tocqueville. Then let's jump another sixty or seventy years to the Committee on Economic Development's report on local government in 1966. The C.E.D., a middle of the road research organization supported largely by American businessmen, reported that most American communities lacked any instrumentality of government with legal powers, geographic jurisdiction, and independent revenue sources necessary to conduct self-government in any valid sense.

Here is a more up-dated commentary on American government which is even worse than Bryce's comment sixty-six years previously, and this is from a group of eminent and, I would say, somewhat conservative businessmen speaking from their research. I think you have to ask...what changed? I think what changed is the nature of the problems with which government was grappling. The relatively simple government of 1830 dealt with the relatively simple demands that people were placing on their government to handle their problems. With the advent of the industrial revolution and the growth of population, by 1966 apparently the C.E.D. felt that the governmental structures for the most part now appeared inadequate to meet the changed problems. I think then I would say that government as an agency of society is inescapably important in our lives as Aristotle, Plato, and Keynes pointed out, but government is subject to obsolescence just like the other social ventures of man. Periodically we have to take a deep look at it to see whether or not indeed it is serving the needs of our own time.

Then we have a kind of paradox today despite the importance which we philosophically at least place on government. In this decade, that is the 1970s, there seems to be a general malaise about government...even hostility and anger toward it. Citizens are demanding more responsiveness from it...they say government doesn't



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listen to us. They want more internal efficiencies to reduce the rate of rise in taxes, and, of course, particularly after Water-gate, they want accountability...who is making decisions and who can be held responsible for them? I think this anti-government feeling is occurring at the precise moment in history when we are facing almost unparalleled national cancers which require the coercive medicine of government to correct. Now maybe that word coercive is a little strong in this context. We are, however, faced with the spectre....and Vermont is beginning to feel it more and more....of spreading crime...pollution. Elsewhere in the population belt of our nation there is the urban collapse of our large cities...in New York for instance. Resource scarcity which we are feeling very much now in the form of energy shortages is an additional set of problems, still only dimly perceived, that will spring out of our demographic changes. The slow-down of our economic growth will also present us with some problems we haven't faced before in our history. But governments formed over 200 years ago in most cases lack power, lack jurisdiction coincident with the problem, and frequently lack sufficient resources to deal with the problems.

I think we are particularly concerned in our own area with the creeping cancers in the countryside. We do sympathize with plights in New York and Detroit, but first things first and we look at our own environment and ask what can we do here and what problems do we have. I think just to stimulate your thinking, I'll throw out the challenging statement in a state that is very proud of its political institutions that in the countryside we may be even less able to deal with burgeoning problems than the large cities are. Certainly changes out here are apparent to the casual observer and I'm sure that you have talked about them this morning and will again this afternoon. We see around us a rising appetite for service. People are displacing the farmer and numerically at least, U.S. farms are back to where they were in 1870. Then we see the rise of non-urban sprawl creating urban problems in rural settings. We see a rising expectation about law enforcement and civil rights putting our local law enforcement officials frequently into difficult situations or straining both their training and their resources. It certainly is disturbing the informal arrangements with life-long residents that has characterized rural law enforcement. Where the local constable knows the family there is a different kind of relationship with the juvenile delinquent, for instance, and the law enforcement officer than there is where the delinquent is an impersonal violator or transgressor. They have to devise new ways of coping with that changed situation.

Also we are faced with increasing spill-over, particularly in crime, which always tends to fill a vacuum; traffic congestion in the form of people seeking to escape the city; pollution and deterioration which come from intensifying use of the countryside and ground water problems as nature's defenses are punctured. We also have to face scattered and disorderly land use. Finally, in terms of our ability to deal with these problems with the insufficient resources at our command, we have the growth of tax consuming rather than tax producing residential sprawl replacing the farms...replacing producers by consumers. This creates a tax problem for



government officials. Consumers demand services which require resources and the tax base isn't traveling as fast as the appetites. Inescapably the local governments are going to have to deal with such problems. In the last five or six decades cooperative federalism is the route Americans have taken rather than unilateral action by the Feds, which would imply the creation of a huge bureaucracy in Washington that is bigger than we now have...much along the lines of the French model where things are run from the center.

I don't believe from my experience in government that the administrative sciences have progressed far enough to enable such a system to produce efficiency without tyranny. I just don't think the science of public administration and its practice have come along far enough to enable us to do everything that the American people want done through government or at least through distant government. Therefore, I think that local government will provide much of the execution of public policies, frequently under federal guidelines and financial support. This means a partnership with the Federal or State government with execution and even initiative in the hands of the locals.

There are other reasons why federalized direction will not work and why overall planning may be difficult or impossible in the U.S. with our present fragmented federal bureaucracy and our fragmented political parties and separation of power system. This is a matter, of course, for some future dialogue because it is a big subject. But if local governments are to be used effectively, I think obsolescence has to be addressed forthrightly. It is a volatile topic, particularly at the local level, because it touches on vested interests and parochial values. The subject of local government obsolescence is one that politicians like to avoid because the mileage for them is minimal and the inner support system and undergirds of the local system are frequently wedded to the status quo. So I think I understand both as an outside observer and also as a practitioner at one time...and I don't want to appear supercilious... I understand that knowing what ought to be done is a far cry from getting it done. We have the models in hand but have to convince the practitioners that the models ought to be used and that's the most difficult part.

Among the time-worn prescriptions that have to be addressed are revisions for instance of state enabling laws because local governments are basically creatures of state legislatures and we have to have the legislature tell us how far we can go. We need probably throughout most of local government stronger executive posts to spearhead action. Alexander Hamilton said the definition of effective government is good execution and for good execution you'd have to have a good executive position. We have to look at the traditional reform, the short ballot, for greater responsibility so we know whom to finger when things aren't going properly. We need a more professionalized bureaucracy at the local level, one that is unpolluted by patronage and non-competitive wage scales. Particularly in the countryside with its small governmental units we need inter-governmental action to effect economies of scale and to



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minimize externalities, that is spill-over of both costs and benefits. There are a number of tested mechanisms to achieve this latter result if people want to use them. You can have a single contracting unit, for instance, perform a certain kind of service for all of the units within a specific region, or you can have a "con-gov" such as Indianapolis has practiced, getting together with the surrounding units and having a single government in certain things. You can have regional planning districts such as we have in Vermont, but with teeth in the plans, or you can have inter-governmental agreements.

We can create special districts. I suppose here in Vermont you could consider using the counties as a special district to perform functions which it traditionally has not performed. In the midwest where counties are more truly governmental in character than they are here, increasingly villages and townships are looking to counties for some kind of leadership on common problems, such as landfills and hospitals and what have you. There is always a possibility of shifting common local functions upward to the next highest level. Since the counties are not effective in Vermont, I suppose that would mean having the state assume the larger share. This is certainly more possible in a small state like Vermont without some of the dangers which would arise in a large state. The inter-governmental approaches in a number of places have been applied effectively to sanitary landfills, public health protection, low income housing, police protection, regional libraries, recreation areas, traffic planning, water run-off, sewage disposal systems, and pooling of tax resources. In the metropolitan area of the twin cities for instance, they have earmarked some of the rising tax base due to new industrial locations for general distribution to all governmental units in the area. It seems to be working out very well and it is a real social invention.

In any specific state, there has got to be support from the state level for revitalizing what we have and we need for that, as I have said, enabling legislation. But prior to enabling legislation we need some kind of agreement by the legislature and the governor on priorities because you can't do everything. What is it you want the local governments to do? Anything?...or do you have something in mind in changing or passing enabling legislation...this, of course, calls for priorities. If you are going to set those priorities, it assumes relatively cohesive political parties that can produce consistent and reliable majorities, willing in general to recognize the leadership role of the governor, the executive.

I think in addition to that you have to look for a professionalized state bureaucracy particularly to provide advice and research for local levels. The local levels in order to make right policy decisions have to have an improved data base and that can come partially from state agencies which cogitate and research a problem. I think in addition to that research of state agencies we've got to provide for even more input into the data base of local decision makers and in most states, and certainly here in Vermont, much of this could be done by educational institutions which might have



more legitimacy for the general public...that is more acceptability.. than self-interested state agencies. Frequently the public feels that agencies try to be self-perpetuating and imperialistic and they are viewed with something less than complete confidence. I think educational institutions still have a good image with the public and being more or less outside the field of politics are less subject to punitive action when they begin criticizing the status quo. It is pretty difficult for a state agency official who has to count on support of the governor to begin dissecting some of the social institutions of the state because he then becomes politically vulnerable. On the other hand, at least theoretically, colleges and other higher educational institutions are not only supposed to transmit the culture, but they are supposed to be critical of it. Therefore, the public recognizes that strange things are going to come out of these institutions!

These seem like formidable tasks in order to get at the problem of creating a livable habitat and they are hard line problems. It is much tougher, I think, to get at these things and to say what we are going to do about them than it is to map out some suggestions for new public policies. Public policies have got to be enacted and implemented. You have to ask what are the chances of them being enacted into law in a semi-pure state and then what are the chances of them being implemented and effective. I think in terms of logical priorities, these considerations about the role of government are inescapable considerations and I admit that he who expects quick and dramatic action is bound to be disappointed. Education must precede action in a democratic society. I'd like to quote Machiavelli at this point...Machiavelli, despite his reputation, has some very trenchant observations about politics, the public sphere...he said that "nothing is more difficult to carry out nor more dangerous to handle than to create a new order of things." Anybody who has presided over any social institution... church, college, government, Chamber of Commerce, a business... knows how difficult it is to introduce change. De Tocqueville warned us of the dangers of thinkers being exposed to the despotism of custom and perhaps we'll have to establish a special suicide squad of Socrates-like thinkers - think tanks - to spearhead blunt discussion about the adequacy and efficacy of local government before we're going to make much progress on it. I think it's quite apparent, and you know this better than I do, being fresh out of a morning discussion on it, that change will occur in our habitat whether we plan it or not...and it ought to be directed change. As Lord Bacon suggests, "He who will not apply new remedies must expect new evils for time is the greatest innovator." Regardless of what we do, change is going to occur and planners have the responsibility of trying to direct that change as best they can. Drift too is a policy and one whose results are becoming increasingly predictable. If we don't want drift, we'll have to opt for more efficient governmental arrangements.

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That is my contribution to the HABITAT Conference today. I'm very happy to get that two-bits worth in here because sometimes the reality of getting good public policy into law and then of implementing it are overlooked. I suppose this is true mostly because we want a "deus ex machina" to save the world. These do not come along very often.

Thank you very much.

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