

Greater Local Control Requires Enhanced Citizenship and Accountability

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Most government programs today include activities designed to achieve some measure of local control. This is usually presented as ordinary peoples' empowerment or the community members' participation in civic decision making. It is hard to find fault with local people acting to control their schools, community affairs or government operations. Nevertheless, this discussion is a critical assessment of local control. It is presented to prompt reflections about what local control is, what it has been and what it could be.

Many Americans fail to register to vote. An even smaller proportion vote in national elections and a pathetically small proportion vote in local elections. The question is: is the average citizen sufficiently motivated to become active in local affairs? The problem is most significant for Americans living in socially isolated urban settings.

Any discussion on local decision making involves going well beyond the boards and councils of local government. It frequently requires participation in direct institutional oversight at an operational level. This calls for a sophisticated awareness and interpersonal trust to effect appropriate collaboration among the people. Such traits are not common among urban people today.

The urban citizen's existence is more characterized as isolated, uninvolved and anonymous. Moreover, such isolation is most evident among the urban poor -- a group targeted as being empowered by these local control initiatives. On top of this, it is questionable whether local bureaucrats and politicians are ready to allow, let alone lead or encourage, authentic public participation.

For some time, local control was a moot issue. As government grew at all levels, specialists and social engineers purported to provide the "best" way to decide the public's future. This expert control was seen as essential since local provincialism might frustrate social and political policies that *enlightened thinking* mandated. As the complexity and seriousness of social issues have mounted and both old and new methods of coping have failed, both politicians and government bureaucrats now choose a populist theme. This is heard in a chorus declaring, "let the people be empowered" or "at least let them think they are deciding." This theme is so pervasive that it ranks with the cardinal points of political correctness of the 1990s.

The swing between elitist and populist approaches to governance have markedly characterized the political processes of the modern

era. These approaches are means used in a more fundamental social operation -- namely the attribution and application of power in the processes of government. Much of the assignment of status and power in America has, since the inception of the nation, been a local affair. Politics at the national and state level have functioned to keep this local preeminence operative.

During difficult social or economic times, power frequently is attributed to the people as a prelude to seeking popular support for proposed social programs. When things are onerous, those who have been in charge do not wish to call attention to their position or influence, either in the past or present. Such attention might call for an evaluation of their performance and sanctions for decisions that may have had unfortunate or unacceptable outcomes. During prolonged difficulties, those who enjoy power, or have received abundant benefits from their position in or their influence on government, give up the appearance of control. They usually indulge in democratic posturing. In this scenario, personal pretensions lessen and some status leaders, especially politicians, become "just plain folks."

Currently social deviance is rampant, social institutions are not working, individual aspirations are unfulfilled and for the first time in the nation's history the socioeconomic expectations of youth are truncated. This opens to question the social and economic plans, programs and policies of our institutional leaders. It encourages these leaders to seek diffusion of accountability by purporting systems of popular participation and local control. Even if such ingenuous behavior or intentions were not so, it is misguided to promote local decision making in a mass society fraught with *anomie* and smothered in *alienation*.

Anomie refers to a condition of social ambiguity in which a person does not know how to behave because the standards of behavior (norms) are unclear, absent or unacceptable to the individual.

Alienation is a condition fostered by social ambiguity in which the individual loses a sense of purpose or meaning in the social roles called for by life within the community.

Local decision making requires certain prerequisites. These include:

- Resolution of profound social inequities, through a system of freedom and equality balanced by justice;
- Redressing or eliminating failed political nostrums; and
- Reintegrating individuals into a social network that constitutes a bona fide community.

All these must accompany, if not precede, the effective participation of the public in the local decision making processes of a community. Before a citizen can become truly civic minded, that person must have some significant sense of identity with his or her local social setting and the society at large. A wholesome sense of identity is fostered by self sufficiency and meaningfully rewarded work. Thus social services that foster dependency on a system that is non-generative and an ideology that glorifies social diversity, even if such diversity is dysfunctional, serve to contradict any effort to empower people. Local control becomes a charade under such circumstances. Or worse, it becomes a means to act out a rejection of the nation's culture. This can foster disunion, isolation and antagonism among people. It also fuels the politics of resentment and creates a mood of despair in the nation. All in all, this reinforces the *anomie* and *alienation* undermining society's normative base.

Disparity Leads to Deviance

Learning what is socially valued and learning how to get what is valued are two very different tasks. Learning what is valued is much easier and more explicitly conveyed to people than learning

the means of achieving the good things in life. For instance, it is easy to define social elements that show ideals such as power, prestige and wealth. People do not easily learn the legitimate or the illegitimate ways of obtaining these esteemed goals. This difference leads to *anomie*.

Failing to use legitimate means, some people will *innovate* through deviant behavior to obtain the esteemed goals. This can range from petty to profound forms of deviance. Those who deviate, though disruptive to society's order, are not always alienated from the general culture. They belong to the social order since they accept the esteemed goals of the society. Using legitimate means to achieve, these goals are perceived as beyond their abilities. Consequently, they seek illegitimate means to obtain their desires.

Alienated citizens do not avail themselves of either the legitimate or illegitimate means to obtain society's goals. Moreover, they are inclined to reject society's endorsed goals or substitute personal goals or goals of the counterculture. Most of these may have socially dysfunctional consequences. In essence, fundamental existence becomes questioned in the alienated state. This can touch such basic issues as work, family life, schooling, civic participation and a myriad of other social assignments in which humans participate.

The deviance, crime, moral disintegration, social disorganization, racism, ethnic conflict, role abandonment and general communal decay are concerns of people in this nation and to people throughout the urban world. They are conditions attributed by social scientists to both *anomie* and alienation. Consequently, the alleviation of these conditions is prerequisite to the enhancement of society and the positive provision of the social order.

Effective local governance and communal-based decision making are characteristics that appear in socially integrated communities, not in those in disunion. Moreover these elements exist in an environment where the politics of inspiration

replace the politics of resentment. Resentment is fostered by a pervasive counterculture that derives its significance from conditions of alienation. Resentment promotes confrontation based on intimidation and violence. It is fraught with aggression and normative violations. This aggression too often is justified as a product of an alleged rage born of class and racial exploitation. In addition, the politics of resentment promotes crime without punishment.

Protest, as we see it in modern society, does not occur in the tradition of Thoreau's credo on "civil disobedience." In his 19th Century work, the protestor accepts the punishment of a bad law to prove its unjust nature. Today all is forgiven of those who are alienated and blame is fixed on conditions and circumstances, not the person. Murderers, including those committing parricide, have successfully used such excuses to avoid blame. Mayhem, mutilation, rape, assault and all sorts of crime against property are similarly absolved. The blame is attributed to neglect, exploitation and all sorts of people who allegedly make felony inevitable. Man as a chooser is not considered. Instead, man, especially the common man, is seen as a victim exploited by richer and more influential members of the community. (Please see boxed text on page 4.)

Associated with this increased condition of alienation in modern society are conditions of powerlessness, isolation, meaninglessness and self-estrangement. In *Alienation and Freedom*, sociologist Robert Blauner identified these four dimensions of alienation:

■ **Powerlessness** is the feeling that one cannot do anything to influence or change one's future and that one's condition is a product of the behavior and influence of others.

■ **Isolation** is the feeling that one is separated from other people by the complexity and mass scale of modern life. Although in urban life people live close to one another, real interaction and emotional ties are infrequent.

■ **Meaninglessness** is a feeling of lack of agreement with or understanding of the meaning of one's social participation. This can cause doubts about the roles one is called upon to play. Such lack of meaning produces unpredictable social behavior and social conflict.

■ **Self-estrangement** is a consequence of meaninglessness. It fosters the process of going through the motions of social participation without any feeling of fulfillment or real identification with the social activity in question.

Calling for local control and decision making before addressing the root causes of anomie and alienation is a short-sighted prescription for failure. Localization may be a deception for an unannounced agenda. Such an agenda may sustain those already in power or give power to those who have a proxy to advocate for those defined as under represented. These disparate power groups are a mixed cadre. They are well served by the body politic at all levels of government. Their politically correct or self serving governmental and social policies have initiated practices that foster the social discord and economic disruption suffered today by the working and middle classes. If that basic core of our society continues to be unfulfilled while special interests prevail, the republic will be threatened. Authentic

Alienation was a construct popularized by Karl Marx when it was argued that the assembly lines of the industrial revolution robbed workers of their feeling of control over their own creative process. In Marx's view, the essence of man is his work and the work on the line was meaningless without the creative process. Workers had become alienated from their jobs. They lost a sense of self worth and continued to participate on jobs for expediency only.

Though sociologists have developed a more comprehensive definition of alienation as noted in this discussion, the basic Marxist terms focusing on economic issues continue to be used in popular discourse concerning alienation. This is most apparent in the justification and rationale given to explain the deviance based on alleged alienation among all sorts of people. In this scenario, minorities are assigned to America's under class by politicians, pundits or the intellectually prestigious. The more refined definition of alienation is not included in this popular discourse.

Simple resolution to this alienation has come to be called empowerment. This has varied interpretations and implications. However, a prevalent theme is that with political power, economic enhancement and equity will be fostered by peoples' participation in local affairs. Frequently overlooked in this solution is the need for responsible behavior, fair play and an adherence to a system of justice to balance the oppositional elements inherent in the concurrent pursuit of equality with freedom. The means to realize such popular participation empowerment and entitlement are open to serious question. Ref: C. Levin, Sociological Ideas: Concepts and Applications.

democratic ideals such as meritocracy will erode. The populace will lose faith in their representative form of government. Subsequently, they will become susceptible to demagoguery and other forms of undemocratic political chicanery.

Today the fearsome character of alienation is announced in some lyrics of popular "rap" music. To believe that this alienation can be dispelled simply by people having their say in local community or school affairs and thus escaping the bondage of powerlessness is a myth -- a cruel myth. It is a means to have those already in control continue that control. Or similarly, it is a means for those who see political opportunity to gain control for themselves in the name of an alienated and powerless populace. Without peoples' participation in the selection, retention and control of these leaders, conditions may become similar to some labor unions or business associations which become corrupted by serving their leaders and bureaucracies instead of the workers or associates.

This ploy of self-appointed leaders frequently goes unchallenged. Those they claim to represent often are disenfranchised, inept, isolated and alienated. Moreover, they are interested in things that give them immediate gratification and demand little for basic social existence. Unfortunately, such a focus does not truly empower them. This self-centered focus is

promoted by aspiring leaders of the disenfranchised masses.

Self-appointed leaders often justify their tactics in a variety of ways. One is a focus on ethnic or racial differences and a theme of victimization. Also proposed, especially by those who are social reconstructionists, are radical changes in the system of political representation. This gives unique meaning to the concept of local control and representative government. The published works of Lani Guiner, a replaced U.S. Justice Department nominee, brought some popular attention to this radical orientation.

Elite/Plutocrats, Neo-Marxists and Social Reconstructionists find commonality in promoting local control. The former because they already are in control locally and believe they can keep it that way if the populace thinks popular control is operative. Moreover, they are well positioned to use their economic power to control the politicians and the bureaucracy of local government at a low margin of cost. The latter two share a view that political forces exist to resolve social and economic inequity. They hold that when peoples' numbers and unrest are converted into political power, the result is a greater sense of empowerment for ordinary people. This will occur if the people are *appropriately led*. Their position is not a simple acceptance of popular sovereignty. It is an elitist approach that sees the people as mediated and managed by the peoples' leaders.

Special political "voice" is ascribed to certain groups who were historically discriminated against or for another reason are seen as warranting special consideration. Those who seek to be the peoples' new leaders seek not to fulfill the American ideal of popular democracy and local governance. They are attempting to reassign power in the community based on a system of indemnity. *Social redress* takes precedence over all other values including *one person one vote*, *meritocracy* and *faith in a constitutionally based Bill of Rights*.

Who can profit most from all of this? The answer is: those characterized as politicians and bureaucrats in three distinct venues -- government, business and unions. Added to this are the "leaders," both chosen and self appointed, representing communities, special interests and even the media. Joined to this clique are the professionals that thrive on government's rule making and the bureaucracy.

Given the broad spectrum of those who benefit from government's activities and the widespread demand for accountability, it is no wonder that the proposed locus of decision making and responsibility would shift to local levels. This is especially attractive if those who benefit most from government also have the most influence over government. Local control gives them the utmost anonymity in the governing processes.

If the move toward local control were genuine, government would no doubt cease to expand. Recently such divestiture has been more form and posturing than reality. When government offloads functions, responsibility shifts downward through the political chain as does funding and tax sources. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, this has not been the case. Nor has government moved to give the citizens choice in the selection of services. This would be real empowerment. All such factors point toward deception rather than the real thing.

There is tremendous value in genuine local control and popular participation in public decision making. It would be wise to make sure that comprehensive plans to redress anomie and alienation are in place concurrently or before the mastery of local control is declared as operative. Doing less than this does a disservice to the people and/or our democracy.

Basic issues must be redressed along with the advent of real local control. Local control is in itself a mere process. The circumstances that promote anomie and alienation in our communities have to be addressed on societal and individual levels. The following issues must be

faced and dealt with by individuals as well as the corporate society.

- Our ineffective educational system;
- The breakdown of family role systems;
- The inequity of the work place;
- Governmental obstructions to the economy;
- Lawlessness;
- Failure to invest in human resources;
- Impediments to investment in capital resources;
- Over regulation for the sake of special interests;
- Racism;
- Stagnation in socio-economic mobility;
- Truncation of entrepreneurial activity;
- Glorification of selfishness;
- Abandonment of ideals relative to communal responsibility;
- The operation of government for the well being of those governing; and
- Political pandering to special interests over the public interest.

As this listing attests, this is not a quick-fix challenge. It is a call for cultural revitalization. It is essential that alternate paradigms are introduced in order to address these long standing issues. This is necessary before local control and local decision making can be truly operative. If we do less than this, we will blame the people when

failure ensues. And those profiting from the failure will go on absolved and enriched by the peoples' loss.

*Local control can work --
it takes the right people and tools*

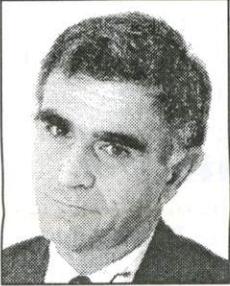
Some efforts to make local control work are emerging. Initiatives fostered by business and community organizations are proving effective. The Florida Chamber of Commerce's WorldClass Schools is such a project. It seeks to provide the tools and measures to enable people to judge the progress and quality of public schools. Evidently, to make local control work for the peoples' benefit, structure to ease the accomplishment of control is needed. The WorldClass School initiative is such a structural aid.

Hopefully, the business community, industry, trade associations, unions and civic organizations will join to foster the sponsorship and facilitation of local control. Through such enterprise the people are empowered and the resources of community are ascribed to the lives of the citizenry. Another arena of government where a comparable initiative is warranted is in the operations and oversight of local districts in the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). Local control is legislatively mandated in current HRS reorganization. However, the role and scope of the local boards are still somewhat vague.

A program similar to the WorldClass Schools project would arm these new boards and the local citizens with paradigms and standards to measure the operations of their local social services system. Given the formal instruction and resources to measure success, members of the public who serve as oversight could empirically gauge success and failure in a systematic and fair way. Putting people in charge of the services government provides to its citizenry is real ennoblement of people in a democratic society. It essentially is an actualization of the peoples' sovereignty. ■

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Dr. Neil S. Crispo, Senior Vice President of Research and Operations for Florida TaxWatch has led TaxWatch's research effort since 1991. He hails from Plantation, Florida where he served in the community college and university system for 31 years as a professor and administrator. Dr Crispo holds a doctorate in administration with emphasis in research from the University of Southern Mississippi. He received his Masters in sociology and social psychology from Florida State University, where he also received his bachelor of science in social science. Dr. Crispo brings to Florida TaxWatch a career filled with the highest academic achievements in the fields of education and the social sciences. He has taught in various academic disciplines and participated in extensive research while serving in Florida's higher education systems.

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