

# Recent Cases of the Progressive City

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*What makes a city "progressive"? In this article Pierre Clavel defines a progressive city by documenting recent cases in cities across the country. Two dimensions underlie the progressive city movement: the desire for greater citizen participation and the desire for redistribution of wealth. Clavel describes how these dimensions were translated into successful program initiatives in cities such as Berkeley, Santa Monica, and Chicago.*

American city government--a national embarrassment in the nineteenth century--had a rebirth in the progressive era. Reacting to strong currents of activism in labor, feminist, socialist and other movements at the turn of the century, liberal politicians experimented with public ownership of transit and power companies, and invented city planning, zoning, capital budgeting and the city manager system as instruments of reform.

## Recent History of Progressive City Government

There has also been a recent history of the progressive city. Despite the rightward shift in national politics since 1968, there has been a series of local experiments in which populist coalitions, rooted in mass movements, have moved city politics and city administration to the left. These movements included the neighborhood movement, the rent control movement, the development of the Rainbow Coalition in Boston, and in some places, black and minority movements such as the Task Force for Black Political Empowerment in Chicago in 1983. In the past two decades progressive government was evident in cities across the country:

- In Hartford, Connecticut, Mayor Nick Carbone followed a populist program over a ten year period in the 1970s.
- In Cleveland, Ohio, Dennis Kucinich became mayor for a term in 1977 by opposing tax abatements for downtown projects.
- In Burlington, Vermont, Bernard Sanders became mayor in 1981 and put together a set of redistributive policies that won him four consecutive terms. In 1988 his successor, Peter Clavelle, followed with a new set of progressive initiatives.
- In Berkeley, California, Berkeley Citizens Action (BCA) dominated the city agenda through the 1970s with

(1) proposals to acquire the power company and decentralize the police, and (2) successful referenda for rent control and referenda to open the appointive boards. BCA controlled city council through most of the 1980s.

- In Santa Monica, California, a rent control coalition won power in 1981 and passed both the strongest rent control law in the country and a construction moratorium. This coalition also controlled city council through most of the 1980s.
- In Boston, the 1983 election mobilized a rainbow coalition led by Mel King. Ultimately, Raymond Flynn was elected mayor. His neighborhood-oriented agenda featured a linkage ordinance and numerous affordable housing initiatives.
- And, in Chicago, Harold Washington became the first black mayor and dismembered the Daley machine. He enacted a neighborhood-oriented economic development program that was one of the most remarkable anywhere until his death in 1987 and his eventual succession by the young Richard Daley in 1989.

## Progressive Programs

What did these places actually do? It is possible to describe their policy initiatives as having two dimensions. On the one hand, it was part of their program to replace the sometimes managerialist, oligarchical structure of representation with more participatory forms. They opened up city government in ways ranging from broadcasting city

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council meetings to a drastic restructuring of citizen board appointments as in Berkeley. On the other hand, these cities devised elaborate administrative schemes, often redistributive in intent, to deliver services and redistribute wealth.

The two dimensions are independent in practice, though tied by ideology. It is possible to pursue substantive programs through administrative measures that are sometimes contrary to participation; widespread participation may at times block program adoption. Nevertheless, the two dimensions are linked by doctrine; redistribution of wealth and redistribution of political power to the people are seen as causally linked, and so progressive cities push on both fronts, despite tensions between the two dimensions in the short run.

Examples best elaborate these program initiatives. With varying degrees of success, progressive city governments frequently tried to open government to greater citizen participation. There was good reason for this; the regimes they replaced tended to control and adapt to representative--and often restrictive--institutions such as the city manager or various city council procedures. It was in the interest of the progressive coalitions, which depended on mass mobilization, to create new channels of access that their supporters could identify with and use. The new participatory channels ranged from the mundane--broadcasting city council meetings on the radio--to the more dramatic--such as voter initiatives with great emotional appeal such as rent control in Santa Monica and Berkeley.

#### *Participation: Berkeley's Fair Representation Ordinance*

Berkeley's Fair Representation Ordinance, passed as a ballot initiative in 1975, illustrates a successful measure to increase participation. Berkeley's city council had a somewhat restricted role under its city manager system of government. For example, city department heads were under instructions not to communicate with city council members except through the city manager. And, city council deliberations were restricted, formally at least, to broad policy questions posed by the administration. Moreover, appointments to a large number of citizen boards and commissions, which covered topics ranging from city planning to housing to library administration, were made by the majority leadership of the city council. *Berkeley Citizens Action* (BCA), in the minority on the council, felt shut out of the process, even though it had many members who wanted to serve.

The proposed ordinance aimed to open participation on these boards and commissions. Provisions of the ordinance

included changing the size of each board and commission to multiples the size of the city council--nine, eighteen, twenty-seven and so on. Each council member would personally appoint an equal number to each board, thus the appointment authority would be decentralized from the council majority to the council members. Objections included the fear that the boards and commissions would become "partisan": there was enough fighting on city council, it was argued; and city government, particularly the appointive boards, should instead present opportunities for problem-solving. Otherwise, people would not serve on the boards, or at least, the best people would not serve.

The ordinance passed, perhaps partly on grounds of political theory, for the choices implied above

are basic to the conceptions we have of citizenship, the appropriateness of conflict, and whether local government needs to represent the interests involved. But the outcome was also practical. By making personal appointments, city council members reported satisfaction that they became more knowledgeable with the problems dealt with by the boards. Further, board appointees felt they had access to a city council member, making their work more meaningful since the connection between board issues and council issues was clarified. Despite earlier fears, the board deliberations did not become more contentious, possibly because board issues tend to be less politically salient than city council issues.

What resulted was a general opening of city government as a result of the Fair Representation Ordinance. Information, which had been repressed under the city manager system--and perhaps even more so under the contentious atmosphere created by the times and BCA's appearance--now flowed more freely.

#### *Redistribution with Participation: Santa Monica's Task Forces*

By the end of the 1970s, Santa Monica was heavily impacted by investment and development pressures. From 1970 to 1980, rents more than doubled and the cost of the average single-family house spiraled from \$36,300 to \$189,000. Santa Monica, arguably in one of the best locations in the hottest real estate market in the world, was enormously attractive to speculative development. A number of large projects were in the planning stages. Based on past experience, it was clear that the projects would burden the largely middle-class population. The projects would demolish affordable housing, and possibly, neighborhood stores and services. Expensive units would replace affordable housing and the influx of higher income renters would compete with

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existing residents for services, driving up the cost while demolitions had reduced the supply.

This pressure was the main factor behind the success of *Santa Monica's for Renters Rights*, the coalition that passed a strong rent control initiative in 1979, and swept to a majority control of the city council in 1981. The coalition ran on a platform which included a pledge to impose a moratorium on development. At the first council meeting, the coalition pushed an immediate six month moratorium on all construction projects and appointed three citizen task forces to consider how developments could be placed under city control on a permanent basis.

The task forces met during the summer of 1981 and included representatives of developers and other affected parties. Members of the city council and concerned citizens attended the meet-

ings. Citizen opinion tended to be very critical toward the developers, verging on a "no development" stance. Eventually the give and take evolved into a plan for "development agreements." In a development agreement a city will give permission to a developer to exceed zoning densities, for example, in return for contributions to mitigate the imposed costs. Task force meetings then turned to the question of the amount the city might ask for. Fortunately, the legal limits were well researched and broad, so it was negotiated in each case. The task force could press hard, and the developers could claim the limits of profitability. The discussions became sufficiently heated for one developer to complain of "legalized extortion." At the same time, one city council member complained of "never knowing how much to ask--whenever the developer agreed, there was the implication that the city had asked for too little."

In the end, the task forces made no agreements. Negotiations shifted away from the task force setting between developer and city council to the new city manager who took office in the fall. Three major agreements were made during this period. In each case Santa Monica got major concessions for on-site services and affordable housing, or payments to an affordable-housing fund. Santa Monica was later cited as one of three major cities, along with Boston and San Francisco, for adopting "linked development" policies.

Three procedural elements helped create this policy. First, the coalition had a mandate and found an effective way to impress that mandate on developers and the community at large through the task force meetings. There was an element of threat involved, since no one knew how restrictive the city council could become; the coalition had swept the council seats in the recent election and the task

force meetings were crowded with citizens testifying to the harm caused by development. Against this background, the developers' usual arguments--invoking the ideology of free enterprise or the threat of pulling out investments--were ineffective.

Second, the city was able to implement the mandate with stable administrative action and negotiation through the city council and the new city manager, both of whom were able to project an image of firm yet consistent policy. Developers and the business community fulminated and complained, but in the end they were able to do business with the city.

Third, over time a learning process occurred on both sides. Some of the citizens and city council members who engaged in the task force and development agreement process moved from a

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largely negative, "stop development" stance to a feeling of being partners in the development process, advocating their interests in affordable housing, for example. Also, some developers gained respect for the city and its administrators.

#### *Redistribution with Participation: Chicago's Steel Task Force*

When Harold Washington was elected Chicago's first black mayor in 1983, he won partly because of a strong neighborhood coalition convinced of the basic importance of well-paying jobs to shore up neighborhood economies. One of the biggest sources of jobs was the city's steel industry, led by USX's South Works which was in the process of imminent layoffs and perhaps closing, putting ten thousand jobs at risk. Given USX's practices in other locations like Youngstown and Pittsburgh, and conditions in the steel industry in general, the city of Chicago, the unions, and the neighborhoods were concerned and sought a solution.

Washington's approach, through his Department of Economic Development, was to appoint a task force to study the situation and make recommendations. City representatives were led by Stephen Alexander, a former steel worker who had been active in the union movement and was now a professional staff member in the Department of Economic Development. The task force could not have worked if the city had tried to work with labor and management representatives separately. The key move was to include community and university representation. In addition to a number of community people, Washington appointed two faculty members from Northwestern University with a background in the steel industry. One of these,

Frank Cassell, a maverick ex-steel executive, was more positive about the possibilities of producing steel profitably in the United States than other executives. The other, Ann Markusen, had recently completed a rather theoretical treatment of U.S. industrial policy, and was prepared to look in-depth at the steel industry within that framework.

As it turned out, Markusen and Cassell were crucial to the task force deliberations. Cassell was the more effective communicator, but he avidly took in Markusen's more academic studies and advocated her conclusions to the larger group. Markusen, for her part, made two key contributions. First, she elaborated a theoretical construct that justified the city's hopes that steel jobs could be saved. The threat to the industry, she argued, was not primarily foreign competition or the cost of local labor, but management propensities to pull capital from viable enterprise in favor of short term investments in other sectors. Second, Markusen completed a detailed study of the inter-firm linkages around steel production. Her study indicated that in addition to ten thousand jobs directly in steel production, the Chicago area had perhaps ten times that number in related fabrication, supply and other specialties that would be at risk once the primary producers withdrew. Both conclusions reinforced the determination of the task force, and undercut arguments for leaving decisions to the private sector.

The city of Chicago's contribution was its ability to set up a deliberative body with a composition that otherwise would not have existed. The results of the task force have been mixed. Some jobs were saved. Later the city pursued a federally financed project which included retraining some of the displaced steel workers. What is most notable was the new set of ideas and perspectives gained from the task force; participants later credited this with creating a "culture of interaction" which was previously nonexistent.

## Conclusions

Perhaps three conclusions about these progressive cities can be drawn from these examples.

First, although each experience sounds like a lesson advocating cooperation, this was not the usual cooperation. In each case there was a deliberate and successful effort at inclusion before cooperation was attempted. Berkeley, Santa Monica, and Chicago brought the most

profoundly opposing forces in society to the bargaining table, when the prevailing institutions of society had refused to grant the traditionally less powerful a legitimate place. On the one side of the table were businessmen and developers who saw their survival threatened. And, on the other side, were representatives of what had become mass movements: Santa Monica and Berkeley's renter coalitions, Chicago's industrial unions, and various parts of the neighborhood movement. These were renters, workers, and homeowners whose basis for living was threatened, a problem fueled by increasing inequalities in society at

large that impacted these differently composed community segments.

The leadership of these cities saw the function of government as con-

necting these opposing forces and bringing them to the table on equal terms. Once that happened, promising solutions were devised to problems that had been avoided or stalemated.

Second, these city experiences had two distinct parts: a mass movement and a government part. Each were distinct, though a very delicate relationship existed between the two. On the one hand, an independent movement was an essential precondition before the city council or mayor could effectively act on its behalf. On the other hand, while the movement was necessary, it was not sufficient. Also needed was a new administrative style that could work with it. In all of these cities this was emerging in one way or another--a separate story.

City government could easily kill the movement. Too many appointments of movement leaders to city jobs--thus stripping leaders from movement organizations--was one of the quickest ways to do this; and the wrong kind of support at the wrong time, was another. But what was most impressive was how the cities learned to nurture these mass movements.

Finally, are these isolated cases that have no relevance for other cities or even for each other? This has been suggested. The mass movement part of the progressive city has been rather common over the past decade or so as have many of the specific governmental innovations. What is rare, however, is the combination of the two. It is possible that even this full blown form of the progressive city will increase in numbers. The underlying inequalities suggest an increase; and the recent cases in Santa Monica, Berkeley, and Chicago are considerable. ■

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