

The Place of Local Government in a Democratic Society

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Some people avoid the application of democracy to local affairs, just as they shun their religion when the practice of it hurts them. Those who merely pretend to believe in democracy do not want matters decided in the city halls or court houses. They prefer to have decisions on local affairs made in the state capitals or in Congress. This type of citizen does not trust a local decision by his county board or city council, but wants nearly everything decided by the state or federal governments. Those who fear the application of democracy at home and in the states and want Congress to decide everything—these people just fear democracy—that is, they fear applied democracy.

The county, township or city is a permanent institution. Frequently a city has become the symbol of a nation. Athens typified Greece; Rome was known as The Eternal City. To the Frenchman, Paris is France. Berlin still symbolizes Germany. Thus we have been contending most strongly in Europe not for Germany, but to save Berlin. This was done because, without Berlin, there seemed to be no unified Germany. There is still another lesson for local governments in our dealings with Germany. When the Reich fell, on May 8, 1945, the national government was dissolved. The German state governments had already been made impotent by the Nazi regime. Accordingly, when Germany capitulated, the entire burden of government rested upon the localities. Since most of the day to day services of government in Germany as in the United States are performed by the localities, that is, the counties and cities, the citizens received services surprisingly close to normal. The point is that local government was indestructible even though the national government disintegrated and the states were wiped out. The City is permanent; it is symbolic; it is eternal. In the local governments of America democracy is proven or denied. Local public officials therefore become the principal actors in a great drama.

The city is the place where most people live in our American democracy. In 1790, only five per cent of Americans were urban dwellers. By 1940, 56.5 per cent were urban dwellers, and by this time more than 60 per cent of our people live in urban places of more than 2,500 population. The other 40 per cent live in counties and townships. Since all people in the United States live in cities, or counties the things that the cities and counties do officially profoundly affect the lives and happiness of most of the people in this country.

In our American democratic society, the city and sometimes the county government, supplies the physical facilities and technical government services which permit industries to exist and people to live together in such masses. Without modern health service, water supply, police and fire protection and sewage disposal methods, people could not live in such crowded groups. If health work had not made progress commensurate with industry, people would die like flies in the cities. Without an abundance of pure water, people could not live as they do. If police work had not progressed and if effective means of traffic control had not been developed, our automotive economy would either strangle itself or end in mass death. But the cities also make it possible for industries to exist. They furnish the labor supply; they make it possible for the workers to reach their work; they furnish water and sewer facilities to the industries; they protect the plants from fire and violence, and in scores of ways make industry possible. Local government does hold a key spot in our industrial society.

The services provided by American local governments distinguish them as centers of democracy. What autocracy, what aristocracy, would serve the individual citizens as our cities and counties do in this democracy? The public service given to the individual citizen, regardless of his social or economic status, distinguish our democratic governments from others. There are available to the individual the cultural facilities of libraries, education and museums. Each life is valued and protected by the health, police and fire services. The personal rights of the individual are protected regardless of his wealth or social status.

New ideas, ideas of progress, typify our democratic local self government. These advances originate and are tested in our city halls and courthouses. They are essential because democracy is not static, it is dynamic. Democracy does not mean keeping what we have because we haven't the ambition or the brains to seek something better. Democracy may be lost for local governments by "clinging

doggedly to powers they can no longer exercise effectively." Therefore, you must remember that local government progress and democracy go hand in hand.

The state governments occupy the really strategic position in our democratic system. They can prevent both the concentration of national power and the weakening of the municipal governments. The states can do this by exercising more fully their own powers in their relationship with the national government and assuming their own responsibilities. They can force democratic action by requiring and permitting municipalities to decide at home purely local questions. They must be strong enough to rebuff all who claim to believe in democracy but prefer the superstate to practical democratic action by the persons most affected by local policy decisions.

While it may seem inconsistent with the first part of this speech, there is still another idea so implicit in democracy that it cannot properly be omitted here. The basic thoughts behind our form of government were tolerance, forbearance and self-restraint. These qualities are disappearing in our national life, not only in dealings between individuals, but also between governments. If self-imposed self-restraints are done away with, they are supplanted by laws and regulations. This leads to an excess of artificial restraints, which deny liberty both to individuals and local governments. While democracy has succeeded in many of its aspects in this country, it can be destroyed by the failure to practice the simple characteristics which are so fundamental.

Tolerance, forbearance, self-restraint, common decency and a sense of fairness—what relation do these have to your chief interests, highways, traffic and traffic safety?

One million Americans have been killed by automobiles. One million Americans have been killed in all the wars in which this country has participated. Those who died in war died with honor. Flags wave over their graves. But those who were killed by or in automobiles—how many of them needed to die? Only a few. I sometimes wonder why God-fearing, home-loving, decent Americans lose all their laudable qualities and become maniacal, cursing, competitive animals as soon as they get behind the wheel of an automobile! The great majority of these million motor martyrs could have been saved by common courtesy, respect for the rights of others and self-restraint in speed. Self-restraint would save the tens of thousands who die as a result of drunken driving. And enough care for the rights of others would prevent persons from driving cars which are unsafe to be on the highways. Individual lives are valued in

a democracy—and those deny the fundamental tenets of democracy, who through carelessness, unfairness, drunkenness or lack of self-restraint, take the lives of others with an automobile. Their victims are just as dead as if they had been killed with a gun or poisoned according to the more ancient uncivilized custom.

If democracy originally meant tolerance, self-restraint and a sense of fairness, this also has a bearing on the distribution and use of money available for highways. There has been far too much bickering between the federal government, the states, the counties and the cities about the use of highway funds. Certainly there will have to be discussion about the division of these funds, but the arguments can be carried on in an intelligent, factual, cooperative manner. The money available for highways belongs to all of the people and not just to those who may be in power in the state capitols, the county court houses, the city halls or the township offices. With the appalling loss of life resulting from motor vehicles, any sense of decency and fair play requires the ascertainment of the greatest needs in the highway fields and the development of cooperative plans for meeting those needs. Some of our states, cities and counties have found they can work together with mutual respect in solving their highway problems. This process must be continued throughout the nation. We want neither anarchy nor autocracy in the division of highway monies and the development of our highway system. Democratic principles of justice and fair play are needed.

Again let us return to self-restraint and common decency as the basis of a democratic government. Let us apply it to those who are using the roads as well as to those who pay for and who administer the roads. Let there be truth in the statements from those who use the highways. Let there be restraint where necessary by those who impose the heaviest burden on the highways in the density of traffic or the weight of the loads carried on them. The essence of democracy is to make it necessary to use the fewest possible number of artificial restraints. But restraint by law is necessary many times in the common good. Those who want to continue democratic government, those who want to avoid government control can do so best by applying to their own business self-restraint and a sense of fairness.

Let us forget these generalities and get down to things for which you and your community alone are responsible in a democratic society. These are the primary things upon which day to day democracy depends and they have only remote connection with the action of the state legislatures or the federal Congress. They evolve almost entirely from the acts and the thoughts of the people in your

own community. These are your own responsibilities in a democratic society :

1. No one but the residents of a community are responsible for the selection of a qualified, reputable city council (or county board) which determines the policy and actions of your city or county. If it is true, as Corry says, that "The most obvious of all the disquieting phenomena is the fallen prestige of representative assemblies," then it is up to you to restore this prestige and your citizens' belief in democracy.
2. Only the local community is responsible for the choice of its mayor who becomes the leader of his people and the leader of the policy-making body. By no stretch of the imagination can failure to elect a good mayor be assigned to the state capital or to Washington. That's done 100 per cent by the local community.
3. For the employment of competent, sympathetic employees and their attitude toward the citizens of your city or county or township, you and you alone are responsible. You must select the right employees and train them to deal competently and sympathetically with the public. The citizen sees his government in action through the employees you choose. Any tawdry view of democracy at work influences him to distrust his government. Faith in democracy is strengthened by harmonious and honest relations between citizens and public employees.
4. The ability of a city or county government to deal with its problems depends on your knowledge of (your community) and its needs. No one else can determine this for you. You and your staff must learn intimately about your own community and enlighten your own citizens about its affairs.
5. Many people judge a local government by the quality of its public buildings. If an outsider comes into public buildings that are dirty and smell, then he thinks that the government smells not only literally but figuratively. Good municipal buildings command public respect.
6. Perhaps it is repetitious to say that the local government is primarily responsible for knowing where the community is headed. You have to be thoroughly familiar with your city's or your county's economic and social life. No mayor and council can either look ahead or deal with the present without such knowledge. This does not depend on action by some higher authority; this knowledge comes from your own local action.

7. Local control of most police work in this country is one of the absolute essentials to the continuance of democracy. In foreign countries seizure of control of the police has always been the first step toward control of all government. To surrender the police power except in a minor way to state and federal governments is to take the most important single step towards the so-called "police state." But if the police are to continue under local authority they must be competent, honest and free. This is your responsibility.
8. The conduct of elections is still in the hands of local governments throughout this country. Election officials are usually selected in the wards and precincts of the cities and townships. They count the votes; they report the votes to a central place. With rare exceptions the local government is responsible for the maintenance of honest elections on which so much depends in democratic government.
9. We casually think that our personal liberties depend on the constitution, the supreme courts, and other remote and nebulous powers. But the personal liberties of the individual citizen 99 times out of a hundred are guaranteed to him by the public authorities in the place where he lives. If he is denied the freedom of speech, it is denied to him by the action or inaction of local authorities. Some few people can appeal to the state courts or the federal courts for the protection of their personal rights. The rank and file of people, however, depend upon you and other local government officials for the protection of whatever personal liberties are accorded them.
10. The impartial enforcement of all laws is one important symbol of democracy. If we believe in democracy, then we believe in equal application of the law to rich and poor, to black and white, and to every citizen regardless of his status. In our country as in few others even the public officials may be called to account for their private as well as their public acts. They are not and should not be immune from the law. Impartial enforcement of law depends on local police and local judges.

The tasks which I have just enumerated are yours and no one else's. They are the things that most directly affect the personal lives of most people. Their execution places on you an almost terrifying responsibility. The federal and state governments must leave with the cities, counties, and townships enough power to carry out the tasks without which democratic government as we know it, cannot continue to exist.