

The End of Mainframe Consolidation

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Victor Jones' work on metropolitan government is a lasting legacy not only for students of urban politics but also for students of political science generally. What is especially admirable about Victor's life work has been a willingness to change and adopt his ideas and concerns to changing times and new realities. Indeed, metropolitan government, in its traditional consolidated sense, has, one might say, gone the way of the mainframe computer. Once a powerful wave of the future, the mainframe computer has been bypassed by the proliferation of personal computers.

The personal computer revolution is an apt analog for metropolitan governance today. The personal computer provides individuals with a share in ownership of the revolution, as well as with empowerment, freedom, efficiency, effectiveness, and the ability to network with other people worldwide, in ways never before possible.

Individuals no longer want, or need, to be tied to, or dependent upon, a big, central mainframe computer. They want the power and freedom that goes with a personal computer. At the same time, they are eager to network with other people in order to make full use of their personal computer and to enhance its computing power.

In the same sense, voters in the United States have, when given the opportunity, long resisted the creation of government equivalents of the mainframe computer in the form of a consolidated metropolitan government. Instead, they cling to their local

government jurisdictions even if, like a personal computer, they do not always know how to work it very well, or they use it only for basic, rudimentary purposes.

This is a key point. Voters seem to value the sense of independence that comes with having their own local government, just as they do with having their own personal computer and automobile, even if they are not very expert at operating these mechanisms, and even if the mechanisms are not in the best condition.

Similarly, we are witnessing an interesting unraveling of many consolidations in a number of Eastern European countries where there have been a large number of municipal "secessions" in the aftermath of the collapse of the communist regimes. Many of the secessionist jurisdictions do not have much fiscal or administrative capacity to function independently, but for reasons of historic identity, democracy, self-government, and accountability, citizens have insisted on escaping from the control of large regional or metropolitan governments imposed on them by the old tyrannical regime.

As recent trends in the United States suggest, however, voters and public officials in different jurisdictions are increasingly willing to network and cooperate with each other for functional purposes so long as, like the personal computer, they can keep their own local government and they can see benefits from networking.

The extent of such cooperation is still limited, though. For example, the Meyner

Center is analyzing the results of a recent national survey of mayors on cities in the global arena. We conducted the survey in cooperation with the National League of Cities, which will publish the survey report in January 1997. Among other things, we asked mayors about working with business and civic groups in partnerships to improve their city's position in the global economy, and also about working with neighboring communities in their metropolitan area, with state officials, and with federal officials. Only a fifth of the mayors said that their city is active or very active in cooperating with neighboring communities to improve their area's global economic position. The results are shown in Table 1.

There needs to be more public awareness, therefore, that just as networking can enhance what one can do with a personal computer, so too can cooperation among local jurisdictions enhance what one can accomplish through any one local jurisdiction alone.

Like the Internet, networking among local jurisdictions may create a certain amount of chaos, and there may be a need for certain minimal policing functions and local protections against viruses, but chaos in the network also can be highly creative and productive, and these are virtues threatened by overreactions to chaos by government authorities.

We need, therefore, new models for thinking about metropolitan governance, models for which networked personal computers may be an appropriate analog rather than the old mainframe. The desire to create some presumably "rational" structure, whether consolidated, multitiered, federal, or confederal, remains strong among many advocates of metropolitan governance, but it is not clear that an exogenously designed structure is to be preferred over, or can be more rational than, endogenously built structures slowly emerging in metropolitan areas. Furthermore, I use the term "governance" here in its dictionary sense of "process of governing" and also, I hope, in accordance with Victor's approach in his 1979 essay, "From Metropolitan Government to Metropolitan Governance." Networking presupposes more attention to process (e. g. , intergovernmental relations) in contrast to the traditional consolidationist focus on structure.

We may also need a new language for this reality. For example, the traditional consolidationist term "fragmented metropolis" carries a negative connotation that makes it difficult to think positively about any arrangements that do not entail consolidation. The term "regionalism" frightens many voters and public officials who associate the idea with regional government, and

Table 1:
Public-Private and Intergovernmental Partnerships to Improve City Position in the Competitive Global Economy

	Business	Civic	Neighbors	State	Federal
Very active/Active	34.6%	25.4%	20.2%	35.1%	19.7%
Neutral	26.1	29.2	26.5	28.4	25.8
Not active/Not very active	39.3	45.2	53.2	36.3	53.8

rightly so, given the past uses of the term "regionalism." Unfortunately, some of the new language that has gained currency in certain circles in recent years, such as "elastic cities" and "citistate," are likely to scare the heck out of most voters.

Instead, terms of discussion, such as metropolitan cooperation and interlocal networking, are more likely to elicit positive responses from voters and public officials. This is important because many policy matters do require cooperation, and economists, among others, tell us that efficient regional and metropolitan economies are important for global economic competition. We should not, therefore, impede this process by creating ridiculous new terms that frighten people or lead them to believe that every step toward interlocal cooperation is a stealthy step toward creating some hidden agenda government, such as an elitist "citistate" or gargantuan "elastic city" that will swallow up their local government.

We should, moreover, think about metropolitan cooperation in terms of the various values to be achieved or preserved by cooperation, such as efficiency, democracy, accountability, and equity.

In terms of efficiency, the empirical evidence seems strongly to suggest that across-the-board consolidation per se is not efficient. Consolidation can create diseconomies of scale in an environment where different government functions, sometimes very discrete functions, have different economies of scale. It makes sense to have an areawide 911 system, for example, while citizens maintain their own local cops on the beat.

Consolidation can also create new administrative fragmentation by replacing the so-called "horizontal fragmentation" of a multiplicity of jurisdictions with the vertical fragmentation that can come with a large bureaucratic structure. Negotiating the bureaucratic maze of most big-city governments is already daunting for most citizens

without making those bureaucratic structures even larger and more complex through consolidation.

In addition, consolidation can create political fragmentation of its own by bringing highly diverse and divergent interests into one government body where conflict may produce paralysis or fragmented policy making designed to appease each interest and to give each interest its own piece of the pie. A multiplicity of local governments defuses and diffuses many contentious issues, leaving it to each jurisdiction to make its own decisions, let's say, about potholes.

In terms of democracy, citizens seem rather clearly and strongly to support the maintenance of their local general-purpose governments. Interlocal cooperation and metropolitan networking can allow this to happen, while still allowing us to address genuinely metropolitan concerns. Most citizens do not vote very often in local elections or participate actively in local government, but the availability and potential accessibility of local government are important to them, as are the values protected and the services provided by their local government.

A long-standing consolidationist criticism of the so-called "fragmented metropolis" has been the lack of accountability of this multiplicity of governments, especially of special districts and authorities. Although this criticism has been leveled repeatedly for more than half a century, there is no systematic empirical evidence to confirm or disconfirm the assertion. The critique is merely repeated again and again, and one finds that the authorities footnoted to support the criticism have merely repeated it themselves.

Nor has adequate attention been given to alternatives to voting in ensuring accountability. Such alternatives include, for example, citizen monitoring of user fees, of service charges, and of actual service delivery in relation to service quality.

In short, we have no firm evidence for saying that a multiplicity of local governments and authorities is more or less democratically accountable than a more consolidated arrangement.

Similarly, privatization offers, in some instances, an alternative to consolidation. Some functions previously deemed suitable for a metropolitan government may be more suitable to private-sector production.

Lying at the heart of the metropolitan government debate, however, are equity values. If equity is defined as getting what one pays for, and paying for what one gets, then a multiplicity of jurisdictions is more likely to be more equitable than a single consolidated jurisdiction. Similarly, if equity is defined as an ability to choose among jurisdictions for better taxes, services, education, and the like, then a multiplicity of jurisdictions is more likely to be equitable than a single consolidated jurisdiction.

Equity, however, is often defined in the debate as equal access to public services, especially for the poor, and, therefore, as redistribution. Generally, it is believed that redistributive equity is more likely to occur within a single consolidated jurisdiction. Under current arrangements, the poor, especially minorities, are concentrated in central cities and certain inner-ring suburbs having declining tax bases and rising service costs.

Consolidation, though, is not necessarily the solution for this serious problem. For one thing, consolidation will not make poor people less poor, nor will it necessarily guarantee better or more equitable public services for the poor. The poor and minorities are already ghettoized in most large central cities, many of which are products of past consolidations. There is no reason to expect that further consolidation, reaching out to the suburbs, will significantly reduce such ghettoization.

Second, the poor will not necessarily be better off by having their central city cap-

ture middle- and upper-income suburban voters. Given that such citizens turn out to vote at much higher rates than the poor, they are likely to dominate a consolidated government and protect their interests accordingly.

Third, consolidation is not necessarily to be preferred over redistributive federal and state policies that seek to empower the poor as individuals, either to move to other neighborhoods or to revitalize their own neighborhoods. The federal and state governments are in better positions than municipal governments to engage in redistributive policies.

Fourth, consolidation is inadequate to the real task of resolving the problems of poverty and segregation in American society. These are deeply-rooted cultural fissures which have resisted government solutions. Although government has been able to ameliorate these problems and provide more equal access for all to the larger society, the sad truth is that the average middle- or upper-income family does not want a welfare family living next door. In the case of race, Americans increasingly share integrated spaces in the workplace and in public arenas, but not yet in their homes and neighborhoods.

In short, consolidation is not necessarily the optimal solution to the problem of redistributive equity, nor is consolidation necessarily to be preferred for the achievement of other kinds of equity in our society.

These brief comments are all too short to pay due homage to Victor Jones, and Victor might not even agree with all of these remarks. But that is the spirit of intellectual debate and dialogue to which Victor has been so stellar a contributor for so many years. ■

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