

PART IV

The Capacities of Local Government

This section views the performance of local political systems from a variety of perspectives. The first two essays try to show how the effectiveness of local government and the rate and character of urban growth are affected by the decentralization of the American political system. The remaining essays offer different and, some readers may think mutually irreconcilable accounts of the role that local government, and indeed government in general, can play in alleviating the so-called urban crisis.

Although in the past decade the proportion of Americans living in urban areas has leveled off at about 75 percent and the largest metropolitan areas of the Northeast and Upper Midwest have either lost population or gained very little, most American cities will continue to grow and—depending upon immigration—some of them may grow very fast. Will local governments be able to cope with the stresses and strains that growth entails? The argument of the first essay is that the answer depends not on numbers of people but rather upon the ratio between the burdens they place upon the political system and the capacity of the system to bear those burdens. Comparison of American with British experience suggests that the ratios are becoming more nearly the same in the two countries, although from opposite causes: in Britain because burdens are increasing relative to capacity and in this country because capacity is increasing relative to burdens.

“The City and the Revolutionary Tradition” was one of a series of bicentennial lectures given in 1976 under the auspices of the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. Here comparison with (nonrevolutionary) Canada is used to support the contention that the tradition inspired by the Revolution, one of direct democracy and free

enterprise, was largely responsible for the extraordinary growth of American cities. What Woodrow Wilson considered a defect of the American system, namely that the public thought that it should have a hand in everything, was a source of enormous and unprecedented energy.

The third essay of this section, "A Critical View of the Urban Crisis," contends that the "urban crisis" is not specifically urban and that there is very little that government can do about it. The social pathologies by which "the urban crisis" is usually defined—multiproblem families, functional illiteracy, crime and drug abuse, and so forth—exist in rural areas as well and therefore cannot be explained in terms of factors, such as overcrowding and the flight of the middle class to the suburbs, which are peculiar to the cities. The crisis, it is maintained, is the result of attitudinal changes, especially with respect to authority, self, hedonism, and egalitarianism, which are pervasive in American culture. These changes, which were set in motion by the ideas of philosophers of the God-is-dead variety, are not likely to be rendered nugatory by exhortations to return to old ways or by government programs intended to maintain social order by the giving of grants or the making of regulations.

The final essay finds government, local and other, to be one of the principal contributing causes of the presence in the inner cities of a large and growing class of disadvantaged persons. The main disadvantage of many of these people, it is argued, consists of barriers to upward mobility that have been placed in their way by government regulations imposed in response to the pressures of coalitions of self-serving interests and well-meaning but mistaken reformers. The minimum wage, for example, is dear to the hearts of labor unions (whose well-paid members produce the things that are substitutes for low-skilled, low-value labor) and by many people who suppose that the law will benefit the poor. In fact the minimum wage is a cause of unemployment among the lowest-skill workers, especially teenage blacks. The Reagan administration's proposed "enterprise zones" would not improve matters significantly in the inner cities, largely because it is politically impossible to repeal the many laws and regulations that in the name of worker protection constitute handicaps.

In this context one sees that the mistaken simplicity of the reform-minded middle class may create a grave and enduring political problem for the society. If, as seems likely, the barriers to upward mobility by the disadvantaged are built ever higher, the inner cities will eventually contain a permanent underclass of such a size and character as to menace the consensual basis of democratic society.