

Green Municipalism

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The concept of ‘Green Municipalism’ as a strategy for social and ecological transformation is receiving increasing attention. I would like to offer a few reflections on this strategy and on how it is being formulated.

I am critical of some aspects of Green Municipalist strategy, but there is a great deal which I find valuable and positive in this perspective. I am in whole-hearted agreement with the emphasis on local grassroots organizing, on the importance of building organic links with many different sectors in the community, on the development and nurturing of truly democratic processes and institutions, on human scale economic activities, and with much else. In these remarks I am concentrating on points which I think need to be criticized, not for the sake of dwelling on disagreements, but because I want to contribute to developing this perspective by drawing attention to what appear to me to be weaknesses in it. I hope that what follows will be received as a constructive contribution from someone who is in substantial agreement with most of the underlying principles.

To begin with the word: *Municipalism*. I know that many of those who use this term readily agree that rural and natural areas must be integrated into our social and ecological vision, but the fact is that the word municipalism inescapably suggests an urban-centred perspective, one which appears to exclude people who do not live in a municipality. To most people, and in most dictionaries, municipality means “city or town”. Saying that ‘of course we also include rural areas in the concept of municipalism’ is rather like saying ‘of course when we say “men”, we also include women’. People are sensitive to issues of language. Like it or not, people who don’t live in an urban area are going to think that something called ‘municipalism’ is not for them.

An Urban-Centred Perspective?

I suspect, however, that the problem with the term ‘municipalism’ is not simply a matter of choosing a more inclusive-sounding word. It is my sense that the analysis underlying green municipalism is in fact primarily an urban-centred perspective, drawn out of urban experiences, with an acknowledgement of non-urban realities tacked on as little more than an afterthought. For example, Dimitri Roussopoulos, a leading spokesperson for ‘libertarian municipalism’ in Canada, refers to the vision as “city-specific.” In articles and discussions on green municipalism, the most commonly cited sources of inspiration include the ancient Greek city-states, the self-governing cities of the Middle Ages, the Parisian ‘sections’ of the French Revolution, and the town-hall meetings of New England, as well as Jane Jacobs’ theory that cities are the natural units of economic life.

I am in not finding fault with these models per se. On the contrary, I have referred to them myself again and again in trying to indicate how a libertarian, radically democratic, decentralist, and egalitarian society might work once freed of the oppressive weight of capital and the state.

But what concerns me is the tendency to assume, based on these models, that our strategy for change must therefore be a municipalist strategy, and that our model of future society must necessarily be a municipalist model.

One Model Fits All?

Again, I have nothing at all against movements for change rooted in local municipalities, nor against federations of self-governing municipalities. What I am critical of is the tendency to see this as *the* strategy, *the* model, which fits all situations. Many good ideas have been shipwrecked because people insisted that they were universally applicable, failing to distinguish between situations to which they applied and ones to which they didn't. I'm afraid that many green municipalists are so smitten by the very considerable virtues of green municipalism that they see it as *the* answer, rather than as *part of* the answer.

This creates a danger of attempting to force the model onto patterns and relationships to which it doesn't readily apply. For example, how do you municipalize the railways, or the Trans-Canada highway, or the St. Lawrence Seaway, or an airline, or a satellite-based telecommunications system? How do farmers and other rural people fit into a federation of municipalities? How do you 'municipalize' the Labrador fishing grounds, or the Grand Banks?

One answer I've heard, but one which I don't find terribly persuasive, is that you define everywhere as being in some municipality or another. You don't live in a municipality? Voila! Now you do! We create them out of thin air if necessary!

Well, sure, if your idea of municipality is broad enough to encompass thousands of square miles, and rural and wilderness areas with almost no inhabitants, then by definition we have a planet consisting entirely of municipalities. But then we're getting pretty far away from Jane Jacobs' ideas of what a city is and how it works, or from those medieval free cities, or from the ideal of face-to-face direct democracy at neighbourhood meetings as the model of self-government. It's going to be tough to get much of a turnout to those neighbourhood meetings when the residents of the 'neighbourhood' have to travel a hundred miles by snowmobile to get to the meeting.

The truth is, trying to force the 'municipal' model on the non-urban parts of the country could wind up looking uncomfortably like the 'regional municipalities' created by Ontario's former Conservative government: units of administrative convenience which often had nothing to do with people's own sense of place. In fact, the Conservative approach was also based on a city-hinterland model, with people living in the rural 'hinterland' being assigned to the jurisdiction of the 'regional municipality' – wiping out dozens of long-established self-governing rural townships and counties in the process.

Maybe there are ways of bureaucratically forcing the municipalist model on every situation, but to me it seems obvious that some kinds of activity are more appropriately organized along other lines, such as regionally, or provincially, or nationally, or internationally.

The autonomous municipality vs. the transnational corporation

In fact, I feel more than a little concerned at how green municipalism, which in other respects contains such a radically different social vision, starts coming uncomfortably close to the rhetoric and agenda of the new right on this point. For what has the agenda of the Mulroney government been over the past seven years, if not the dismantling of all national economic and cultural institutions in Canada? What we have seen has been a systematic assault on the railway system, the postal system, national social and medicare programs, unemployment insurance, federal transfer payments from the better-off provinces to the poorer ones, the CBC, the National Film Board, the

National Research Council, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), the Canadian publishing industry, and native broadcasting.

To me, part of the value of these institutions – and an important part of why they are being attacked by the right – is the fact that they are national in scope. They provide mechanisms, however inadequate, for transferring resources from the ‘have’ to the ‘have-not’ provinces. They place a barrier in the way of provincial governments seeking to gut social programs: for example, a province which doesn’t meet the requirements of the Canada Health Act loses a portion of its medicare funding. And there are certain kinds of economic and cultural activities which because of the economies of scale only make sense on a national level in a country with Canada’s population: for example, a railway system or the CCOHS, or a set of minimum environmental standards.

The new right’s strategy of dismantling or gutting national programs and institutions (with Free Trade and Meech Lake as key components of that strategy in Canada) needs to be seen as part of an international strategy by corporate capital. The goal is to create a world-wide ‘free market’ in which no government will be strong enough to pursue policies, for national or social reasons, which run counter to the interests of transnational corporate capital. Hence the arguments from the new right that ‘the age of the nation-state is over’. In the Canadian context, ten or more relatively autonomous provinces are seen as easier to manipulate than one central government. Part of the strategy of the transnational corporations has always been to play country against country, province against province, city against city. Whoever offers the most tax concessions and the fewest environmental restrictions gets the investment.

Seen in this context, adopting a radically decentralist municipalist strategy while an economic system based on immensely powerful transnational corporations remains in existence could simply be a means of subordinating our towns and cities even more completely to the corporations. If environmental standards are the same across the whole country, it is at least impossible for a company to use economic blackmail to pit town against town.

Two strategies

These considerations help to highlight the fact that there at least two possible versions of a green municipalist strategy.

The version which I have critiqued above is formulated as a strategy of ‘municipalizing’ the economy and creating self-reliant but federated cities. I share much of the underlying theory but I question what I see as the overly narrow strategic focus on economically and politically autonomous municipalities.

An alternative ‘municipalist’ strategy would be to see the locality – the neighbourhood, the town, the city, the workplace, the county, the bay (e.g. in Newfoundland) – as the logical focus of acting, educating, discussing, and organizing for social, economic and environmental change. The emphasis would be on creating a social and political movement with strong local roots, but one which would not necessarily see the locality as the primary unit of all forms of activism, nor the municipal model of government as the Procrustean bed which everything has to be made to fit. Movements not organized on the basis of locality, such as those focused on particular issues or groups, would also have a greater place in such a strategy.

Isolated by the ‘Party’ label

The adoption of any strategy raises the question of how to implement the strategy.

In this context, I want to touch briefly on the question of how Greens should relate to this fall’s municipal elections in Ontario, and to the role of an electoral party generally. Many of my feelings have already been expressed very cogently by Brian Milani and Mike McConkey in their article “Is This Green Politics in the Loblaws Era?” As someone who lives in a constituency in which the reactionary incumbent squeezed back in only a handful of votes ahead of the NDP challenger, and in which the couple of hundred votes collected by the Green Party candidate might have made the difference, I found myself unable to understand what purpose the Greens had in running.

I am by no means a supporter of the NDP (See my article Let’s Stop Kidding Ourselves About the NDP in *Canadian Dimension*.) but I would still prefer to have an NDPer get elected than a Mulroney Conservative or a right-wing apologist for the development industry. Do the Greens think they are doing anyone a favour by playing the spoiler in close races? If there was some remote hope of Green candidates winning or even turning in a respectable finish I could see some point, but why deliberately expend money and energy in creating the image of Greens as a fringe party?

Beyond this specific point there is a more general one. For a political movement to be able to legitimately proclaim itself as a party, it first has to *become* a party. A popularly based political party would be one formed by the coming together of a broad cross-section of social and environmental movements with significant popular support. The formation of such a party would be preceded by wide-ranging discussions of principles and program. This never happened in the formation of the Canadian Greens, and as a result the Green Party continues to be seen as another small unrepresentative sect by most popular organizations and most environmental groups.

Or a part of the movement?

If Greens in the Green Party are serious about changing this state of affairs, they need to back up and start playing a different role, emphasizing the building of local organizations and broader networks, as one participant organization or coalition among other organizations and coalitions, rather than as a party which claims to represent the interests of many other movements who in reality play no part in the Green Party.

This perspective should be of particular relevance to those Greens who identify, as I do, with the libertarian or libertarian socialist critique of representative democracy. As libertarians we argue that our system of government is not truly democratic because people are reduced to choosing every few years among representatives who are not answerable to them. Yet the Green Party has entered the same game: it too puts forward the claim to represent, or to offer representation to, people to whom it is not answerable, people to whom it relates as passive voters.

The Green Party needs to backtrack, to give up its claim to represent the movement. It needs to see itself as a constituent part of a movement which still needs to develop a shared program, let alone declare itself as a party.

Accordingly, the Greens need to shift their focus of activities from pursuing an elusive electoral goal to (a) developing a clearer and more coherent program, and (b) working to win acceptance for that program – or to modify it – in the wider movement.

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