

Local-Sized Democracy

by Mike Gismondi

Political struggle at the local level is out of fashion. In today's increasingly "globalized" world, appeals to the local can often appear parochial and tradition-bound. Determining whether effective political responses to ecological sustainability and social justice could come from the local level requires us to revisit the somewhat discredited, often forgotten place called municipal politics.

Local politics is close up. It combines reason, body language, tone of voice, and appeals to the heart. It happens at council and regional school board meetings, at health board hearings and roundtables on affordable housing, at social service councils and library committees. Detailed, slow and often dull, the politics of daily life concerns itself with safe drinking water, rough roads, garbage service, arena rental fees, and requests for walkways or fresh airspace - all requirements for living together. Local decisions get thrashed out in the grocery store aisle, at the car repair shop, in church, the liquor store, and on the sidewalk. Proximity is paramount in local politics.

Municipal politics, sometimes called a distant cousin to provincial, national, and global politics, nevertheless engages fundamental issues of democracy, social justice, and ecology: how to run public meetings, use mediation or problem-solve, weigh public interests against private interests, put needs of people ahead of those of business; how to turn equity, diversity, or sustainability slogans into community practice; how to horse trade between jobs and ecological integrity, and draw lines between the commercial and residential use of urban space and other values.

The local may be a small realm of control, but governing local ways of living still rests with community boards and regional commissions. Regrettably, not many people want the job; few come out to intervene. In Athabasca, where I am a town councillor, only one person attended the hearing for the general municipal plan. Small wonder that business and free market attitudes come to dominate local planning and politics.

But free market arguments don't always rule. A few years ago at a public meeting to discuss rezoning Athabasca's heritage riverfront for a Vancouver grocery store chain, over 300 people confronted a mayor who told the crowd that he would bend over backwards for new businesses in town. The people refused to bend, however, and their outrage stopped the rezoning. In local politics, moral expectations to put community first provide opportunities for resistance. Change begins when people speak their piece, organize, keep pressure up, and challenge authority.

But how to involve more people? Head-on arguments about resisting globalism seem to fall flat at the local burger bar. Concerned with day-to-day challenges, people don't see their relevance. And, although local politics is not party politics, most municipal politicians and townspeople don't want to bite the provincial or federal government hand that feeds them. In my experience, less overtly political approaches draw people into debate and keep them coming back. Focusing on ecological sustainability is one example of oblique politics in which the move from concrete to abstract offers potential for engendering resistance to larger global forces.

From Pee to the Precautionary principle

Tots pee in swimming pools, and for the past 25 years, Athabasca has dumped chlorine in the tot pool to protect the health of parents and children. But, chlorine burns eyes and makes skin feel funny. When parents asked for a reduction in chlorine, the pool manager and community board researched alternatives and proposed an ultraviolet (UV) system, which eliminates bacteria and dramatically reduces chlorine use. The 6-month pilot project to measure cost savings and user satisfaction found that the UV system worked. Now, a similar UV project for the adult pool shows that necessary alterations will be expensive. However, users argue for protecting public health - chlorine affects many with asthma and respiratory problems as well as lifeguards working on the chlorination

equipment, and chlorine in wastewater creates other environmental problems. The debate moved from a comfort issue for tots and parents, to sustainability and the adoption of the precautionary principle (to remove the toxin before it becomes a hazard) by Council. UV for the larger pool is now a cost efficient success, that is, people and environment friendly.

Flower Power

People in my town like gardening and flowers. Four years ago several approached Town Council to enter the Communities in Bloom (CIB) program. This judged competition has become a good-natured rivalry between municipalities in which government, homeowners, businesses, public works staff and others spruce up yards, plant flowers, and beautify their community. Municipal councils compare their policies on urban forestry, turf maintenance, pesticide use, heritage programs, conservation, and volunteerism against CIB standards for innovation, leadership, and completeness. Judges from across Canada assess each community against CIB national criteria and award one, two, three, or four “blooms.”

Most Athabasca area residents who took on CIB were not involved in town politics nor were they in the green movement. Some openly opposed environmental views, yet discussion of flowers quickly shifted to broader political issues of sustainability as CIB judges in Athabasca in 2001 favoured no pesticide use in public parks and suggested introducing insects for weed control. When CIB judges proposed the town require land owners to post lawn signs 3 days before spraying biocides, the public works manager took up the challenge of no pesticide use and, in 2002, town council discussed regulating biocide use on private property.

In a province known for its frontier individualism and anti-regulatory attitudes, such issues would never have made it into a town bylaw debate if brought forward by local environmentalists. The bloom contest increased council support for recycling and reduction, environmentally sound use of pesticides and biocides on public lands, initiated a tree farm and a tree planting program for neighbourhoods, and spilled over into expansion of environmental reserve land and funds for pedestrian and bicycle walkways.

Other examples of the progressive potential of local democracy abound. Most promising for the environment is a recent decision by the courts that municipal governments can set higher environmental standards than provincial governments. By elevating cost savings debates to the principle of conservation, local green activists should be able to broach issues of over-consumption and lifestyle changes, reducing ecological footprints, and even signing the Kyoto accord to address global equity.

Conclusion

Is it folly or naiveté to ask citizens to act locally in this era of globalization? Has the local been subdued by the global? Local political terrains are no longer isolated; they nest within well-established provincial, national, and international municipal associations. These multiple spheres of influence offer opportunities to articulate with other progressive factions – what some have called globalization from below. We need not withdraw, or retreat, to the local; rather, we must create coalitions that link the strong place-bound identities of local people to broader social spaces, social movements, and forms of global governance. After all, in local-sized democracy people develop the capacity to listen, to tolerate difference, to negotiate, mediate, and persuade, and to make and defend tough decisions. They develop their political capacities to turn ideas and abstract principles into shared policies of public support. Progressives need to invade local spaces and engage local decision-making sites - to occupy and change them. The local is not the only place to do political work, but it may be the best place right now for the greatest number of people.