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The Urbanist Party

By Felix Salmon

With 80 percent of Americans living in suburban areas, could they organize into a new political party?

If you're reading this, the chances are that you live in a large and vibrant city whose local politics are controlled and stifled by unresponsive and uncreative national parties who have approximately zero interest in urban issues. How is this possible? More than half the world's population now lives in a city, and cities provide most the creativity behind the economic growth upon which the rest of the world relies. University of Toronto urbanist Richard Florida calculates that just 40 global megaregions are responsible for two-thirds of the world's entire output. And yet cities inevitably, consistently, and dispiritingly punch below their weight politically. City-dwellers, as such, have almost no say in national politics, and invariably end up subsidizing the increasingly-anachronistic lifestyles of their rural compatriots.

The reasons for this are not hard to understand. While cities are nominally democratic, in reality the party-political makeup of their legislatures almost never changes: the national parties have effectively hijacked the local political process by using the power of their strong national brand. If you don't know anything about the local candidates on the ballot, then you'll end up voting for the party you support nationally, even if the issues you care about locally aren't directly addressed by the national party. (As New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia famously said, "There is no Democratic or Republican way to pick up garbage.")

Local elections are generally bare-bones affairs, characterized by a lack of money and a strong turnout from party loyalists. To get on the ballot as the candidate for a major national party, it helps to be a dutiful party hack who will vote reliably with the rest of the bloc. And to run as an independent against the local party machine is often political suicide.

The exceptions to this rule, insofar as they exist, are in big-money, high-profile, citywide mayoral races. Given the opportunity to elect mavericks who will push creative and innovative policies in the face of apathy from national political parties, the citizens of great metropolises like San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Toronto, London, Paris, Miami and Berlin have been very happy to elect maverick politicians as mayor. But even the most powerful and imaginative mayor tends to find a lot of party political opposition, both nationally and locally.

Political parties exist for a reason: they're a useful shorthand to let people know what they're voting for even if they don't know the candidate, they help separate ideas from personalities, and they allow individuals in a democracy to feel that they're part of a real political movement, as opposed to merely being supporters of a certain individual.

In the absence of an urbanist political party, then, city-dwellers will probably never be the political force that they can and should be. Most political parties are founded on the basis of some common bond, be it the trade union movement or the church. And most of those common bonds are increasingly irrelevant today, especially to city-dwellers. Instead, a new set of political desires has started to arise, one which simply doesn't mesh with any parties on the left-right spectrum.

If you live in a big city, you will probably find yourself more in agreement with your neighbors—or even with city-dwellers on the other side of the world—than you will with rural members of your national political party.

The big political parties are very wary about immigration, for instance; big cities live and thrive on immigration, and support it strongly.

Cities are also vastly ahead of the rest of the world when it comes to gay rights; they've elected far more than their fair share of openly gay prominent politicians, and act as the safe haven to which young gay people flock whenever they feel persecuted in their small towns. A high density of gay people in turn feeds creative industries and increases the number of people interested in revitalizing the urban centers which were bywords for poverty in the 1970s and early 80s, and which are now the one part of the overheated housing market which seems likely to survive the property crash.

There are lots of other policies, too, on which city residents would tend to agree. They are generally "greener" than the population as a whole: more environmentally aware, more willing and able to implement eco-friendly initiatives from cycling to recycling. While they might support local farmers, they have no time for big subsidies to agribusiness. They are much more likely to support efforts to build and strengthen educational institutions, especially at the university level. And in general they love heterogeneity and freedom: they're skeptical when politicians talk about social norms or try to impose any kind of censorship.

In that sense, the core of the urban constituency finds itself in opposition to the nostalgic tales spun by both the left (which would love to recreate the job security of the 1950s) and the right (which would recreate the nuclear families of the 1950s). It's not impossible for cities across the country to join forces on an urban issue which has been neglected by national politicians: the prime example is the Mayors Against Illegal Guns Coalition, which was founded by Thomas Menino of Boston and Michael Bloomberg of New York.

Indeed, Bloomberg has been at the forefront of efforts to reach out to other mayors both nationwide and around the world: he had a famously close relationship with Ken Livingstone, when Livingstone was mayor of London, and ended up trying to implement Livingstone's signature scheme, the congestion charge, in New York. In doing so Bloomberg had the support of his constituents,

and he even had the support of the federal government. His nemesis turned out to be Sheldon Silver, the speaker of the New York State Assembly, who had no compunction in going against the wishes of his Manhattan constituency when he perfunctorily killed the bill in the New York state capital of Albany.

As soon as the left-wing Livingstone was ejected by Londoners and replaced by the right-wing Boris Johnson, Bloomberg lost no time in making friends with the new mayor. Doing so involved no political contortions, however, for although Livingstone and Johnson are polar opposites in terms of the left-right continuum, they actually ran on very similar platforms, emphasizing the need for more, better, and cheaper public transport—yet another indication of the fact that urban politics is orthogonal to national politics.

Which is not to say that there are no areas of disagreement in urban politics. Livingstone and Bloomberg love new construction and lots of glass towers: it shows vibrancy and is evidence that the city is doing a good job of keeping up with international competition from the likes of Shanghai, Dubai, and Mumbai. Mayors like Johnson, on the other hand, are more preservation-minded and are suspicious of new developments; in this they're joined by many long-time residents of inner cities who are finding themselves priced out by the forces of gentrification.

What's clear is that as the world becomes denser, spikier, and increasingly urban, issues surrounding affordable housing will only become more and more prevalent. Rent control doesn't work, and construction costs in urban areas are skyrocketing even in the face of the housing downturn. But even if mayors can't stop rents from rising—and indeed many mayors look at rising rents as evidence of the success of their policies—they can improve public access to amenities like well-maintained parks, well-stocked libraries, and well-run community centers—the sort of things which generate a lot of goodwill among the long-term residents of the city who are increasingly feeling like strangers in their own home town.

What's more, there's a way of doing this that doesn't simply involve cities asking the federal government for money, or the federal government proactively setting up entities to disburse money to needy neighborhoods (which seems to be about as far as the Democratic party's urban policies stretch). Up until now, cities have felt themselves to be at the mercy of their national governments— but at some point this century, that might well change. “Who really are the power centers in the world economy? Is it the prime minister or China or is it the mayor of Shanghai?” asks Florida. “India without Mumbai and Bangalore doesn't exist.”

Conferences of mayors are a good start, but only that. Divided, cities will continue to be marginalized; united, they could be the defining political force of the 21st century.

If there is hope for the world, it lies in cities. Cities are post-nationalistic: since they thrive on cosmopolitanism and immigration, it's pretty much unthinkable that they could ever resort to violent means to settle any differences they might have. “People move across urban barriers more easily than across national barriers,” notes Schleicher. If they covet some other city's pleasures and wealth and amenities, they'll simply move there. While migration between countries can be a destructive force, migration between cities is nearly always constructive.

Cities, then, compete by trying to make themselves as productive and innovative as they can—what Florida calls “the agenda for competitiveness and prosperity.” No city is ever helped when its national leaders go to war; rather, its businesses are taxed and its most productive employees run the risk of being drafted. In that sense, urbanism is a force for peace and prosperity.

What's needed here is not ad-hoc coalitions along single-issue lines, which is what we've had until now: a group of mayors against guns here, a livable-streets group there, a green group, a gay-rights group, and so on. Indeed, what's needed isn't more progressive mayors—the world is quite good at electing those. Rather, it's a political movement, a brand—some kind of organization which could endorse candidates for local office at levels many layers down from mayor.

At that point, for the first time ever, city-dwellers could actually have a real choice when they go to the polls in their local elections. Rather than just voting for whomever the local party machine decided to foist upon them, they could vote for an urbanist candidate, someone bearing the credentials of a party which includes widely-respected major politicians from around the country and even the world. They could vote against the sclerotic system of patronage, and for some real change in their city's political structure. And if and when enough such candidates got elected, they could start having a real effect on national and international politics as well.

“One of the reasons local ideas are so weak at the national level is that we have no idea what's popular and what's unpopular at the local level,” says David Schleicher, an economist at George Mason University. Once a movement had proved its genuine popularity at the ballot box—and that wouldn't be hard, given how bad the major parties have been at governing cities—national politicians would sit up and start taking a lot of notice.

Of course, all of this would take money. There have been failed attempts in the past to do very simple things like just set up an urban caucus within Congress; a truly national urbanist movement would take a visionary with very deep pockets to found. But such a movement is surely necessary.

“Instead of cities being bastions of poverty and blight, now they are engines of density, innovation and competitiveness,” says Florida. “So we should pay attention to how they're governed. Instead, we are just muddling through.”

Mike Bloomberg, are you listening? You'll be out of your job soon enough; surely there is no better or more appropriate cause to which you could dedicate your foundation.