

The Hedgehog and the Fox

Revan Tranter

In 1953, one of the 20th century's wisest men, Sir Isaiah Berlin, wrote a famous essay, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. He took as his theme a line from the ancient Greek poet Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Berlin used it to draw a distinction between thinkers who contribute a number of valuable but unrelated insights, and those who develop a unified vision or a universal principle.

In the context of American metropolitan governance, it was the hedgehog who long held sway. For many years, respected researchers and distinguished academicians argued that the civic life of our major metropolitan areas would be made more efficient, and their physical surroundings more attractive, if they were reorganized under the aegis of a (probably two-tier) metropolitan government.

Three Questions

In general, I think they were right, and that most of our larger urban areas today would be far better places if their growth had taken place within the framework of a strong regional plan and a unified education system. But we need to ask three questions: why didn't the hedgehog's logical approach carry the day; why haven't the fox's many smaller and crafty alternatives satisfied everyone instead; and who's likely to prevail?

First: the reason for the hedgehog's failure to persuade probably lies deep in the American psyche (after all, other countries handle regional government with much more dispatch and a lot less emotion). Since at least the 18th century, we've had a fear of big government and a distaste for paying the costs of whatever government and services we do want. Although not taught this way in our schools, the fact

is that the colonists were better off, and paid lower taxes, than the folks back home whom they wanted to bear the burden of defense (or attacks) against Native American Indians.

Today, we seek the United Nations' help when we want to launch a military strike, yet we're the organization's biggest debtor. We want the world's most elaborate and expensive system of health care, but object to its costs and extending it to millions of people now left out. How much likelihood is there that regionally many people would support what appears to be an extension of government, or take responsibility for dealing with an area's social problems and disparities they prefer to avoid and are reluctant to pay for? Precious little.

To answer the second question (why haven't all the foxy ideas taken care of the regional governance question?), we need to consider briefly what these ideas are, where they've succeeded, and where they've failed. Across the United States, we see an extraordinary array of regional initiatives, many going back several decades. There are annexations and city/county consolidations, there are counties assuming regional responsibilities, there are regional special districts, including port authorities (handling air, sea, and ground transportation) and air and water quality and transportation agencies.

And there are countless cities and counties showing a good deal of creativity in cooperating with their neighbors to provide joint services (fire, police, solid waste, purchasing, computer technology, etc.) There are increasing examples of private and nonprofit sector involvement in regional improvements, e.g., in forming asset districts to fund central city sports and cultural facilities used by people from throughout the area.

Large corporations, more easily than local governments, think in regional terms, because to them boundaries are meaningless at best and barriers at worst. They tend to be acutely aware of the challenges presented by poorly educated job applicants, and by employees who can scarcely find decent, affordable housing and who commute too long a distance.

Many Programs

By far the most pervasive of our fox-like approaches, however, have been the country's regional councils of governments (COGs). Almost all urban areas, and many rural ones, have one, usually voluntary and governed by a board consisting mostly or entirely of elected officials from member jurisdictions. Collectively, the array of tasks they undertake is extensive. For example:

- air quality;
- capital financing (including debt instruments);
- circuit-riding city managers and planners;
- computer network management;
- cooperative purchasing;
- demographic and economic forecasting;
- economic development (including international trade);
- habitat protection;
- land use planning;
- meals-on-wheels (for the elderly and handicapped);
- police and fire coordination;
- power pooling (electricity and gas);
- risk management and liability insurance;
- solid waste management;
- training;
- transportation planning;
- water quality; and
- workers' compensation administration.

By no means do all regional councils undertake all these programs. But the second key thing about COGs (the first being their voluntary nature) is their eclecticism and flexibility. Most can do what their members want them to, and while in some cases that means not much more than federally-mandated programs like transportation planning, in others it amounts to a substantial if haphazard array of ser-

vice, or enterprise, programs—saving regional taxpayers across the nation scores of millions of dollars a year. Now take this great variety of programs, and all the other approaches mentioned above, and you find an astounding array of ways to cope with regional problems and opportunities.

So why haven't these achievements—most of which have been found acceptable, useful, even welcome—been enough to satisfy everyone? I suspect the answer lies not in what Henry Cisneros (in the *National Civic Review*, volume 85/2, 1996) has labeled "things-regionalism," but in what he calls "people-regionalism."

Sixteen of the 18 subject areas listed above are concerned with efficiency. Only two—land use and meals-on-wheels—have to do with equity, and it is with the first of these that COGs have registered their one overriding failure. They have not, generally speaking, had the will, the capacity or the mandate to deal effectively with expensive suburban sprawl, exclusionary zoning or low-income housing—nor with the severe disparities in our local school systems.

As to the third question—who will prevail, the fox or the hedgehog?—at least for the next decade I'd put my money on the one with the long tail. What is most likely to work is steady growth in the varied assortment of ad hoc approaches and initiatives being conducted in regions all across the country. They can be improved and expanded.

Ad Hoc Approaches

For example, Uncle Sam can help markedly by extending to other areas (such as environmental programs) the TEA-21 approach that enables separate but related programs to be tackled together—or in achieving an internationally-recognized metropolitan benchmarking of economic and social factors by which competing regions around the world can measure themselves.

The private and nonprofit sectors are starting to be an increasing part of the picture. There's no doubt they could do much more to encourage state governments to help regional councils carry out their responsibilities—even (or especially) on the challeng-

ing land use question. Farmers, along with residents living just beyond metropolitan regions, are increasingly concerned by loss of prime agricultural land. Environmentalists too are concerned about habitat protection. Add the business community, more than ever disturbed by dense traffic and long commutes, and there is a growing chance of state help to regions in this difficult area of San Francisco. But COGs will have to be ready to pull coalitions together. And the National Association of Regional Councils is ideally equipped to help America's regional agencies achieve best practices and entrepreneurial awareness. For the key thing is to be thoroughly prepared for whatever opportunities occur.

John Gardner had it right in a letter to Bill Dodge (quoted on page 49 of Dodge's *Regional Excellence*), "In a lifetime of watching a wide range of social problem solving, I've concluded that such problems rarely get solved by an orderly attack at the most logical point. I think one sees a lot of actions on a long,

ragged front with breakthroughs at often unsuspected spots. There are partial victories, and with luck, enough to result in an overall victory. But it's untidy."

Untidy it may be, but it's pragmatic, it's very American—it's *Regional Adhocracy!* The hedgehog hibernates, and the fox gives out a crafty smile. ■

Revan Tranter received a law degree from Oxford and a masters degree in public administration from the University of Pittsburgh. Upon his retirement from 22 years as executive director of the Association of Bay Area Governments, he joined the Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California Berkeley as a visiting scholar in February 1995. In 1996, he received the International City/County Management Association's distinguished service award. He serves as a senior fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration. He is the author of numerous articles in local government publications here and abroad.