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The Decline of Progressive Government in Berkeley, California

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In 1975 the Cooperative Ownership Organizing Project, led by Berkeley city planning graduate Edward Kirshner, published *The Cities' Wealth*, a manifesto of projects loosely supported by Berkeley Citizens Action (BCA), a radical political body that was, within a few years, to gain control of that city's government. *The Cities' Wealth* should stand as one of the key documents in the visionary history of the city planning profession along with Ebenezer Howard's 1898 *Tomorrow: A Path to Real Reform* – which Kirshner credited as its inspiration – and a very few others (Bach *et al.*, 1976). It laid out a series of steps toward the reform of that city's economy and political arrangements: the takeover of the city's public utilities, the creation of affordable cooperative housing developments, support for community controlled social service agencies as an alternative to city bureaucracy, the creation of neighborhood organizations with a veto power over large developments, and the opening up of the city's many boards and commissions to wide participation through an innovative "fair representation" ordinance. BCA at that time only held a small minority foothold in the city's nine-member city council, but within a decade it reached a dominant majority position, and put several of the proposals of *The Cities' Wealth* into effect.

By 1998 BCA was a much diminished political force, the "progressive" city council majority was now a minority, a "moderate" mayor had won office in 1994, rent control, which had buttressed BCA votes, had been gutted by the state legislature and the courts, and BCA's core supporters were disillusioned while no comparable cadre of new activists had risen to succeed them. If BCA represented a "cycle of reform" in the 1970s and 1980s, that cycle seemed near its end. How did this happen?

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Berkeley Citizens Action and the left evolution in the city

First, what was the trajectory of Berkeley's left? Some would argue that BCA was a far left vanguard that was fated to flame out, but that Berkeley was a basically liberal, decent place that would weigh and implement at least some of BCA's ideas, whatever happened to BCA. Frederick Collignon argued something like this in a paper he gave in 1996: "reform" democrats, including some who had been elected on a BCA slate, enacted a series of compromises in the 1990s that, while antagonizing the now isolated "left" within that organization, would nevertheless count as "progressive" in the general climate of US politics and went far beyond – in a left direction – what happened in most cities (Collignon, 1996).

What this suggests is a left evolution in Berkeley. It had started at least as early as the 1960s, when after a long struggle a liberal group gained control of the city council from long standing Republican Party domination, and began a series of reforms including school integration. Later in the 1960s the effects of the student movement at the Berkeley campus of the University of California began to affect local politics, along with civil rights activism and the antiwar movement. There were a series of political campaigns that involved these activists, and from 1969 on there were "radical" members in a minority status on the city council. Berkeley Citizens Action (BCA) emerged in the mid 1970s and became adept at opposition politics from within a minority position on the city council. It fought campaigns for new legislation by voter initiative, which had the effect of increasing voter turnout around such issues as police reform, and winning on rent control, a neighborhood preservation ordinance and the Fair Representation Ordinance. BCA ran slates of candidates in elections for School Board, Rent Board, city council seats and the mayor's office[1].

BCA had a brief experience of council leadership in 1979-81 when it installed Gus Newport as mayor and won three other seats on the city council, and was able to pass legislation in coalition with one other council member. It lost this majority in the next election, but after a successful initiative moving the election date to coincide with even-year national elections, BCA reached its high tide in 1984. It swept into an 8-1 majority on the city council under Newport and undertook a number of its long gestating programs: it brought to fruition a well organized, participatory

[1] On the beginnings of liberal and progressive politics in Berkeley in the 1960s and 1970s see Clavel (1986), and Nathan and Scott (1978).

process producing a waterfront plan, undertook a series of innovative economic development initiatives, and initiated a controversial program of public housing for low income residents on eleven sites scattered throughout the city's neighborhoods. In apparent reaction, more conservative forces introduced and enacted by voter initiative a change in the election arrangements in 1986, imposing a shift from at-large to district elections for council seats, two year council terms, and a run-off arrangement in cases where no candidate won fifty percent of the votes. This undercut BCA in a number of ways, resulting not only in losses in the 1986 elections (the majority went to 5-4) but also the BCA convention itself, which had drawn attendance of 500 and made a difference to the chances of election, no longer counted for as much. Increasingly candidates ran as independents, their concerns more neighborhood oriented, less connected to citywide and national questions.

By the 1990s, the "progressive" coalition on the city council had become something different from BCA itself. Loni Hancock, who had been elected mayor on a BCA slate in 1986, increasingly governed with a coalition of independents, Greens and BCA slate members, and fashioned the "progressive" policies that departed from what had become BCA doctrine after about 1990. Collignon, a Berkeley city planning professor and two-term councilmember on the "moderate" slate, characterized the council's policies during his terms in 1990-94 as "reforming the BCA agenda", including:

– Collaboration with downtown business interests. The BCA council under Newport in 1979-86 had worked with business, but also had taken a stance independent of the business community. Some of its business oriented initiatives were designed to carve out a business constituency that would support some of BCA's anti corporate agenda – for example, a program supporting minority businesses in South Berkeley, or a voter initiative to institute commercial rent control. In 1985 Newport brought in a professional economic development specialist, Neil Mayer, to head an economic development unit within the planning and community development department, who instituted such innovations as exactions, first source hiring, inclusionary zoning, and support for small business over corporate and downtown business.

But when Hancock resigned in the final year of her second term, the "progressive" council appointed a downtown businessman as interim mayor, a person who had often been at odds with Mayer; and supported a series of anti-loitering and panhandling measures at odds with BCA positions, but long favorites of downtown business interests.

– New police initiatives. Against the historically consistent BCA position, the "progressive" council voted to add 24 new police officers and community policing.
– Explicit distancing from BCA as an organization. Hancock was quoted to the effect that BCA was:

"no longer needed, harmful to achieving the agenda, and should be disbanded...two other councilmembers considered part of the progressive majority won their seats by running independently against the candidates picked by BCA and won criticizing BCA" (Collignon, 1996, p. 2).

Collignon, who had contemplated a run for mayor in 1994, thought at one time a "reformed" Berkeley could still represent a viable sort of social democracy, and in his paper he presented the sorts of principles such a regime could run on: an emphasis on public management, a communitarian emphasis on obligations, responsibilities and community standards of conduct," and a "strong emphasis on economic development." The "moderate" mayor elected in 1994, he pointed out, had been unable to reverse any of the "progressives" policies, in part because the latter had done most of the reform themselves in the previous two years (*ibid.*, pp. 8-10).
But in 1998 Collignon was not so sure of this. By 1998 the quality and experience of the council had deteriorated, leading to frustration on the part of the professional staff in city hall[2]. Politics in general had degraded. Both the left, and the liberal program supported by the moderates, was diminished.

Interpretations of BCA decline

There is still the question of how to understand the importance of the BCA in not only Berkeley's but US city history. There are a set of interpretations that can be laid out. Some seem patently false, others problematic, all full of implications for future action on city problems:
1. A hostile metropolitan and national press and politics undercut what BCA was attempting to do. It was surely true that BCA had its enemies in the press, who tended to trivialize the city's politics when it was not editorializing against BCA proposals and candidates explicitly. Moderate councilmember Fred Collignon (1996, p. 1) noted that:

[2] Frederick C. Collignon, interview by Pierre Clavel, May 4, 1998.

The *Wall Street Journal* on an almost annual basis devotes a front page article to decrying initiatives (e.g. strict rent control, moratoria on condominium development) taken by the city, lest they become a model for other cities.

And in terms of political moves, state legislature actions vitiated the city's rent control laws, which was a key setback. But while this external climate of opinion and political resistance took its toll, why did it take so long? There was resistance in the 1970s and 1980s as well, when BCA was on the rise. In that period the city found ways around the resistance. The first strict rent control legislation was passed by initiative in 1972. It was then declared invalid in the courts, whereupon the BCA led city council passed a second rent stabilization law that got around the court objections. This was the period of BCA's rise, which occurred despite outside resistance. So other factors, such as a decline in BCA's internal capacities, seem more persuasive.
2. A demographic shift undercut BCA's working class base, particularly African American voters. BCA activists worried about demographic change from at least the early 1980s onward. Gentrification, they thought, might favor the "moderates," while pushing the base of the BCA to the right as well. In 1998 Eve Bach acknowledged this factor:

...fundamentally the politics, and the demographic basis for the politics, has changed. Before 1984 people in the neighborhoods had a vision of income diversity. Later that changed. Newer residents were young professionals who had come from the suburbs. Now the BCA program threatened what they saw as their birthright to homogeneous neighborhoods... the demographics got us...[3].

Even so, BCA forces had a fighting chance to stem this tide. Bach said:

Earlier we'd been able to stabilize the demographics in two ways. One was rent control, which kept units below market rate until the state pre-empted the law in 1992. This then motivated the landlords to want Section 8 permits, so that the could get rents up to the HUD-defined market rate. But when the legislature pre-empted parts of the rent control law so that rents were allowed to rise to market rates, we lost both the less wealthy renters, and the HUD section 8 subsidies[4].

3. The shift toward, then away from left positions was a natural swing of the political "pendulum". This argument, while descriptive, obscures a great deal of detail. Beneath the surface, there were structural changes in Berkeley

[3] Eve Bach, interview by Pierre Clavel, May 5, 1998.
[4] *Ibid.*

politics. What BCA accomplished in the period up until 1986 was a deepening of the "civil society" that underlay politics and the city council level. It focused the energy that emerged from the student, antiwar and civil rights movements into concrete outlets. Some of these outlets were formal government posts like city council seats or the positions freed up in the Fair Representation Ordinance that opened up the city's dozens of boards and commissions. Others were private and nonprofit organizations like the Berkeley Coop. and hundreds of others. One observer (McGrath, 1986, pp. 6-15) noted:

> ... culturally, the... left has... broken the monopoly of moderate and conservative political culture by setting up rival institutions – coffee houses, penas, bookstores, newspapers, a feminist record label, a radical radio station, theatre groups, popular music groups.

BCA, through its convention and other activities, tied these things together, in part harnessing the outpouring of theory and ideology that came from the people themselves – *The Cities Wealth* being only one example.

With the move to district elections, a crucial raison d'etre for BCA – the needs of councilmembers for a citywide support and legitimating institution – disappeared. Meanwhile some of the other parts of the non-governmental apparatus, like the Berkeley Coop, failed. Student activism reduced or, occasionally, turned to the right. Berkeley political life thinned out.

4. BCA made tactical and strategic blunders once in the majority, that hastened the swing toward the center. Conventional wisdom was that BCA, long accustomed to opposition, skilled at attack, master of voter initiative and referendum politics, could not adapt to being in the majority. Particularly, it was said, it allowed itself hubris at gaining an 8-1 majority in 1984. It embarked at that time in a flurry of legislation, did not sufficiently listen to its opposition, and was successfully attacked as "arrogant" by its opponents.

But it is not clear what BCA should have done. The main issue on which BCA was attacked was its proposals for local public housing for low income families (this meant minorities) on eleven sites scattered throughout the city's neighborhoods. Neighborhood opposition arose, localized opponents banded together in a citywide network of opposition, federal housing regulations hamstrung the city attempting to organize appropriate and timely hearings, and "it was a disaster" for BCA[5].

[5] Eve Bach, interview by Pierre Clavel, 1989.

But affordable housing was a matter of principle to the BCA, particularly its "left" grouping, which sought to build a base in the city's black and working class populations. With this population threatened by gentrification, public housing was, along with rent control, one of the main instruments for maintaining its base. In the event, BCA and the city administration stuck to its program, and was defeated, eventually, by the effects of the district voting referendum.

Eve Bach, a BCA activist who had co-authored *The Cities Wealth* and later became assistant city manager during the housing controversy, thought the city was right to fight for the scattered site housing. First, the housing was proven a good idea by events: there had not been one complaint from the neighborhoods after the housing was built on ten of the eleven sites. Second, "If we were going to lose, I'd rather we lost on a principle like the housing than from some scandal, or corruption. This way is a cleaner way to go somehow..."[6]. All regimes lose eventually, she thought, and it was important how you went, as well as what you accomplished when you had support.

Stages and positions

All of these reasons for the decline of Berkeley's left are true. The remarkable story is how it lasted so long. For the "left" in Berkeley went through different phases, each different from what preceded it, and in passing from one form to another a new perspective is gained on what had gone before. The radicals of the 1970s succeeded a "liberal" government and political organization of the 1960s. The BCA in power during 1979-81, and then during 1984-1990 was different from the oppositional BCA. And the "progressives" under Loni Hancock in 1990-94 were distinct from the BCA period, as the "liberal" government after 1994 was also different.

At its high point in 1984-86, with an 8-1 council majority and a mandate to enact a series of reforms that it had been considering for at least a decade, BCA was perhaps the most formidable progressive political force in the nation. Winning a council seat required the endorsement of the biennial BCA convention, a remarkable coming together of activists and political operatives, perhaps 500 strong, which debated not only city policies but political stances toward national and international issues from

[6] Eve Bach, interview by Pierre Clavel, May 5, 1998.

Nicaraugua to South Africa and the Middle East, and formulated positions that connected the local to the international issues. Thus BCA generated a coherent – if often debated and conflicted – position that had the potential to tie divergent neighborhoods and interest groups together.

Because of the Fair Representation Ordinance, council members had the capacity to appoint dozens of supporters to boards and commissions, where city business could be debated and issues formulated and put on the agenda. And because BCA put these positions into debate, opposition persons from other groups – pre-eminently the Berkeley Democratic Club (BDC), but also environmentalists, gays, students, and a Green Party candidate, could be engaged in debate at a relatively deep level. Politics in Berkeley had a good deal of depth and breadth for all groups, not just BCA.

The succession of "left" formations after 1986 demonstrates, most of all, the loss of this depth. Loni Hancock led a "progressive" coalition after the district initiative, while observers gradually came to see the narrowing of viewpoints on the council, the parochialism characteristic of the district system. BCA conventions became less important, often rubber stamping candidates who had put together their platforms based on their own personal networks.

By the 1990s there were proposals to reduce the numbers of boards and commissions, BCA was perceived as a narrow leftist splinter group, and the "progressives" on the council were passing legislation hand in hand with the downtown business community. But the change was not simply the policy directions of the council, but also the underlying structure of politics. The base in terms of the activism and debate outside of official politics had shrunk. In this respect, the "liberals" had won, but at the price of having a government that could no longer do as much in any direction.

Some questions for American urban policy

Thus by 1998 Berkeley's left was by any measure in decline. Their experience, so remarkable, really profound in that they lasted so long and went through several phases, needs much more consideration than it has received. The following questions, at least, need deeper analysis:

1. Was the decision to pursue the scattered site public housing program in 1985 a strategic mistake or a matter of principle that its advocates needed to pursue? It is worth noting that BCA's stand echoed an earlier American public housing conflict, in Chicago in the 1950s, when another mayor chose the opposite course. Chicago chose to segregate low income blacks in large projects; other cities followed, and the nation was still paying the price a half century later.

2. What are the relative roles of Gus Newport's and the BCA left's class-based and principled stands on the housing and other issues, versus Hancock's reconciliation with other progressive elements in 1986-94? The transition from Newport to Hancock had parallels in other cities with principled or movement-based mayors: Harold Washington was followed by Eugene Sawyer in Chicago; Bernie Sanders by Peter Clavelle in Burlington, VT.; and Ruth Goldway by Denny Zane in Santa Monica. In each case the first cleared the path, the second followed up with compromise that sometimes gained legislative breakthroughs that had eluded the more principled, in some cases perhaps more dogmatic predecessor. The sequence of innovator followed by consolidator has been laid down as an organizational principle at times (Selznick, 1957, p. 112). But the principle offers only vague guidance: how long should the initial push last? How much compromise results in how much loss of principle, and in the end, voter support?

3. What were the dynamics and motivation behind the BDC opposition to the BCA, and how did this evolve through the period after the first radical council election victories in the 1970s? "Radicals" are often surprised and sometimes defeated by the intensity of opposition they face from those they have threatened. Berkeley, as BDC supporters insist, remains a "liberal" city. What does this mean? How did Berkeley liberals come to terms with the interests of landlords and others who sought to undermine radical policies? The BDC supporters fought the BCA out of a deeper motivation than the policies themselves. When they tried to get control of the Rent Board, for example, their claim was that they could run the system better than BCA could. Possibly this was disingenious: they wanted to run the system, but unlike those used to being in opposition, they felt a deep and intense threat of being dispossessed when defeated.

Some of the reaction to the BCA may have run even deeper, though. There was a tide of reaction in the nation as a whole while BCA was in its ascendancy, a combination of class, race, gender and other anger. What compromises did "liberal" BDC supporters make with these sentiments, if any? To what extent did these national currents undermine and debilitate BCA people, while supporting their opposition?

Answers to questions like these will have far reaching implications for the situation the American politics and urban policy now faces. More consideration is needed.

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