

John McClaughry

Bringing Power Back Home:

Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale

John McClaughry brings to the grass-roots citizen activism espoused by E. F. Schumacher a uniquely Yankee twist. A founding member of the Schumacher Society and chairman of its board of directors, he is a former member of the Vermont state House and Senate. Currently he is president of the Ethan Allen Institute and the Institute for Liberty and Community in Vermont. He also serves as town moderator for his hometown of Kirby. In the early 1980s he served as a senior policy advisor in the Reagan White House. In 1989 he co-authored, with Frank Bryan, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale*, from which this lecture draws.

Adamantly independent and an individualist in his political views, McClaughry has described himself as a libertarian, agrarian, distributist, Jeffersonian, Republican decentralist. As such, he believes strongly in "that peculiarly American spirit of creative self-help, mutual aid typified by the frontier barn raising."

Much of his thinking is based on his experiences in Kirby with its population of just under three hundred. There he has learned that when the seat of power becomes remote, citizens become the subjects of a central power. This being the case even in independent Vermont, it is McClaughry's intent to restore participatory democracy.

Because John McClaughry's work is not merely theoretical but involves committed service in the political life of his town, county, and state, his career can be singled out as the embodiment of Schumacher's decentralist politics in action.



I am going to begin today on the topic of recreating human-scale democracy by giving you a small-town Vermont fable. This fable, however, is true, and it happened in my town of Kirby, Vermont.

We are a small town, population 285. We have no village store or post office. Our 285 residents have five different postal addresses. We have as public buildings only the town hall, which was donated by a church back in 1934, and the town shed adjacent to the town hall.

The town shed, which is the centerpiece of this little fable, was built in the late 1930s to accommodate a horse-drawn grader that grades dirt roads (I mention its purpose for the benefit of those of you who are from the asphalt jungles). In due course, however, graders got motorized and got longer, and it came to pass that the town owned a grader about four feet longer than the shed. Now, working outside on a piece of equipment in a Vermont winter is no fun, as the road commissioner ruefully reported on several occasions, so we decided we needed a town shed that was insulated, partially heated, and big enough to accommodate the grader and the ten-wheel dump truck.

Acting on that decision, the road commissioner bulldozed down the old shed and had a contractor come and pour a foundation that was about eight feet wider and four feet longer than the old town shed. Then, on the appointed day, after he got some framework up, about twenty-five Kirby residents, men and women, showed up with tools and began to put up the siding, roofing, door frames, and so on, which is the way we do things in a small town where nobody is cash rich and everyone hates to pay higher property taxes to hire people to do things like that.

It was a Saturday morning. We had some staging provided by one of the contractors who lived in town, and we went to work putting up the siding. The older ladies in town who were not able to climb up on scaffolding provided a potluck lunch and supper for the workers. We got most of the work done on Saturday, and Sunday we came back to do the last part of it.

On late Sunday afternoon, when the final stages were being completed, there mysteriously appeared a short, earnest gentleman who announced that he was from one of the state's environmental agencies and had some business with us. The work stopped. He gave a speech, directed toward Buster Wood, our chief selectman and a dairy farmer, which went something like this: "You are building a building on town property without having a permit under 10 V.S.A. Chapter 151, and I am here to inform you that you are going to pay a five hundred dollar fine for your insubordination."

By this time there were twenty-five men standing about watching this action.

Buster pushed his John Deere cap back on his head and said, "Well, actually we aren't building a new town shed." The fellow said, "You're not?" and Buster said, "Nope, we're just renovating the old shed." This bureaucrat looked about and saw twenty-five men standing around with hammers and beat a retreat. I am happy to say he never came back.

There were two schools of thought on how to deal with this. The conservatives defended staring the man into submission. The radicals like myself thought we should have taken him hostage. My side lost that argument to the counterargument that the state of Vermont has hundreds of these guys, and it won't pay to get any of them back.

This little fable illustrates a serious theme: the constant advance of the central power. In William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" there is the line, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." I often think about that when I see the crumbling of the Soviet Empire on television these days and the disarray that Leopold Kohr has spent a lifetime predicting.

Yet even though at the macrostage we see large empires becoming unglued, as prophesied back in the fourteenth century by Ibn Khaldun—a famous Arab historian who ought to be more widely known in the West—when you look at it from the worm's-eye view from, say, the town of Kirby, you see power moving steadily away from the people, away from our little democracies, and toward a state government. To many of you who come from New York or California, the State of Vermont probably resembles a Gilbert and Sullivan government, but to us it looks more like "The Return of Godzilla."

The people of Vermont have steadily been losing power to the state government for twenty or thirty years. I dare say the same thing has been going on in many other states, although perhaps on a different schedule. We are, in our little state, victims of what Frank Bryan and I, in our book *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale*, call the Systems Axiom. Leopold Kohr has described it wonderfully well in his many works, and I need not embellish his description much. In a nutshell, the Systems Axiom calls for the administration of all public business in accordance with the standards of uniformity, efficiency, and bureaucracy. Uniformity, because we all are entitled to the same whoever we are, wherever we are, and whatever circumstances we are in. Efficiency, because we must be careful not to waste any motion or energy. Bureaucracy, because it takes a trained cadre of professional experts to make sure that all these plans and rules are uniformly obeyed by a submissive population.

Contrast that to the decentralist vision Fritz Schumacher and Leopold Kohr have offered. Diversity, where differences abound and people are not forced into a mold to satisfy someone's picture of how society should operate. Democracy,

where people make choices after debate and after considering the effects of their decisions on their community, even though the choices may turn out to be "wrong" later on. Spontaneity, where people deal with problems in a way that suits their culture, their community, and their preferences, rather than obey a plan written for them by somebody who defines the official, orthodox, proper way to do things. It is this decentralist vision, as opposed to the Systems Axiom, which is the central theme of our book. Even though it deals with our own particular state, I think the same contrast can be found in many areas of human life and in many parts of the world.

Our governor, a rather liberal and well-meaning woman who wants good things for everyone, gave a speech last January in which she called for "a new era of planning" for our state. Her words in describing the new era were that it will be "specific in requirements, uniform in standards, and tough on delinquents." It could have been Benito Mussolini in Milan in 1922.

The idea is that planning done by the right people—people who are public spirited, well-educated, dedicated, and honest—will minimize the chances of things going wrong, which they will certainly do if the future is left to the whims and vagaries of ordinary unwashed citizens who don't pay enough attention to how the world ought to work. This is the vision of a lot of people in history, some of them not very savory. It is the kind of thing we have had to face from well-meaning people who decide that everything should be ordered correctly.

*The Vermont Papers* is a protest against that. It is more than a protest, though; it is an attempt to present a positive vision in the tradition of the others who have preceded me today and in past years at the Schumacher Lectures.

That tradition is called "civic humanism." It came from the time of Machiavelli's Florence, not Machiavelli as cynical advisor to the Prince but Machiavelli as expositor of the Florentine ethic that can be traced back to Polybius and forward to James Harrington in England and to many of the founders in this country, notably Thomas Jefferson. This civic humanist ideal held that in order to have a free republic, to protect the republic against the degeneracy that results in despotism on the one hand and mob rule on the other, and to maintain the immortal republic one must have the following circumstances:

1. Because politics is based on a material foundation, there must be widespread distribution of power and thus of property. There should be no great aggregations of wealth and no grinding poverty; the great bulk of the free men and women of a society should have some independent means and not remain beholden to an economic superior.
2. The citizen must be a participant in the civic life and the repository of virtue. This virtue is acquired not by piety and adherence to religious ideals,

although that was all right, but by a devotion to advancing the common good through participation in the public process, obviously a democratic ideal.

3. Every able-bodied male served in the militia to protect the republic against invasion.

The civic humanist ideal required an economic base widely shared, near-universal political participation, and a military obligation to protect the republic from its enemies. This tradition has been very deeply rooted in my little state of Vermont, which, as some of you may know, was an independent republic for fourteen years before it agreed to merge with the United States of America. That decision is not always appreciated in these times, especially when Washington thinks up more and more things for us to do. Most recently, for instance, the Federal government required us to offer special education for disabled children, which it promised substantially to pay for. The Federal government ended up paying only 4 percent, leaving the state of Vermont, and all the other states for that matter, to pick up a very sizable burden or else face very expensive law suits by those who are now entitled to receive the benefits.

This civic humanist ideal means restoring to people their role as citizens instead of subjects. For citizens are people who participate in making the decisions about the way they live their lives. Merely going to the polls every two years or four years to cast a ballot for one or another television personality who happens to be running for office is a pretty cheap version of citizenship. Voting on a state referendum question, as Californians are famous for, is also a fairly insubstantial form of citizenship.

By citizenship we mean active participation in public affairs at a level such as the town or neighborhood where the individual's contribution can be appreciated and can count for something. The small human community, celebrated by Aristotle and Lao Tzu, the place where you belong and where you recognize those who belong and those who are strangers, where the good of everyone is tied together in an interconnected web that is ruptured only at the peril of everyone in the community—that is where citizenship resides.

By contrast, in a society that is planned to be "specific in requirements, uniform in standards, and tough on delinquents," you are no longer a citizen but rather the subject of a central power. Once we become subjects, we lose those sparks of humanity and democracy and freedom that have made this country such a great country in world history.

How then do we regain our role as citizens when we are confronted by this Godzilla bearing down upon us? Well, in Vermont we have 246 towns. A town in Vermont is a box on the map, more or less square, which was laid out by

surveyors in the eighteenth century long before people came here to live in any numbers. Town populations range from 40,000 people in Burlington to zero people in a couple of the small towns that never had any people at all at any time in their history. These 246 towns, up until the 1950s, were the primary governing units of Vermont; the state government was something of an afterthought. The state government consisted of such entities as the Supreme Court and the offices of the Secretary of State and the Attorney General, but the business of welfare, of education, and of transportation at the local level was basically conducted by the town.

As you might suspect, however, a tiny little town like mine is hard-pressed to manage that kind of responsibility in the decade of the 1990s. Frankly, we do not have the material or intellectual resources to do it. Our town employment consists of a town clerk, who spends five hours a day two days a week in the office, and the road commissioner, who works a forty-hour week on the roads. Our three selectmen meet every month. They often find it really difficult to deal with complicated programs and rules sent down from Montpelier and Washington.

Now, the conservatives in Vermont have always said they deplore the removal of power from the communities to the distant state government. Their cry has been, first, "Don't take any more away" and, second, "Give it back." On both counts they have lost. The state continues to take power away from the communities and never gives any of it back. So drawing the battle line between the 246 towns and the state is guaranteed to be a losing cause. If one were to ask those conservatives who are urging restoration of power to the towns, "How can your little town possibly carry out the functions that have been taken away in the last thirty years?" chances are that in two-thirds of the towns the answers would be pretty unconvincing, for as the conservatives have defended town government against the state, the state has gobbled up more and more of the functions of town government. We are now heading for a day, not too far away, when all we will do at the local level will be to issue dog licenses.

On the other hand, the liberals as a rule will say, "If we have 246 towns making all these decisions about welfare, education, and transportation, a bunch of them will do it wrong. People in one town would be entitled to higher welfare checks than people in other towns. People in one town will have a different high-school curriculum than people in another town. Obviously this would be unfair to somebody. They've all got to be the same somehow, and even if nine-tenths of the towns are capable of doing it right, which we doubt, the fact that the remaining 10 percent will commit some flagrant offense against the Greater Good requires that the whole process be regulated, coordinated, and ultimately financed by the central government."

The liberals will definitely win this debate. Frank and I have tried to open up a new dimension in the debate by saying that we reaffirm the goals of citizenship, democracy, diversity, of people managing their own lives on a participatory basis and looking after the needs of their own community. To do that, however, we have to create a new kind of local government that is big enough in scope and resources to receive those functions back from the state government and carry them out efficiently.

To that end we propose resurrecting an old Vermont name, "shire." We have a reprint of a map issued about 1780 which shows what is now the entire state of Vermont divided up into three shires, an old English term that meant a local government composed of a number of separate parishes or tuns, the predecessor of the towns or townships, the predecessor of today's townships.

If one looks at a book like George E. Howard's *Local Constitutional History of the United States*, published in 1888, one will find a fascinating analysis of how the local government system emerged from the Teutonic tribes—the Angles and the Saxons—and how it was replaced after the Norman conquest in 1066 by a system of counties subservient to Norman counts.

We do have counties in Vermont. They are judicial districts, not real governmental bodies. At the county level we elect only a sheriff and a state's attorney and a couple of judges. All the judges really do is operate the courthouse for a state court system that is now increasingly centralized. None of this activity is related to a body politic. We have no county council, no county chief executive, or anything like that, although many midwestern states do. We need to create some kind of governmental body to receive the usurped governmental functions back from the state.

The shire is that kind of a body. In population shires would range, by geographical necessity, from about 2500 in the upper reaches of the Connecticut River to about 60,000 in the Burlington area. We believe that within those shires the people can restore the kind of participatory democracy Vermont has always been famous for.

In a way, this is practiced today in the town of Brattleboro, with a population of about twelve thousand. It's too large for a mass assembly of its people. The town is divided into four wards, each of which has a ward assembly meeting, where the issues are debated by all the citizens in person. Then each ward elects a hundred people to take part in the representative town meeting. That is the model we propose to follow in most of our shires. There would be neighborhood assemblies or the present small towns or whatever other divisions the shire cares to make. Their people would send delegates to the shire council to make the rules of the shire community.

To finance the functions that are brought back we propose an innovative

adaptation of the Canadian revenue-sharing system. It would assure that there is an equal tax base per capita in all the shires. The shires would then levy taxes on that base to carry out their governmental responsibilities.

Finally, the shire needs to have an identity. Because it, unlike the institutions that grew out of human experience, is being created *de novo*, we need to create a citizen loyalty to the shire that protects its independence vis-à-vis the higher-level government. To do that, we propose a lot of identity building through things such as the shire flag, the shire anthem, and shire license plates.

The financing plan, the political structure, and the cultural identity of the shire can be pretty much what the citizens want to make of it. Those of you who are familiar with local government know there is something in the law known as the Dillon Rule. Named after a long-dead jurist, it says that local governments are the creatures and subjects of the state. The state can merge, abolish, reform, or reorganize local government at its pleasure, by the majority vote of the legislature and the signature of the governor. That is the rule in all of our states.

We propose reversing that rule. We propose making Vermont a federation of shires, where the state government is a body with certain limited and specific powers. The shire would retain residual power to deal with shire problems. To explain the division of functions between state and shire is an interesting but time-consuming exercise that I won't go through for you today; there are, however, a couple of functions that must be retained on the state level.

Obviously the justice system, the laws against crimes, would have to be uniform throughout the state. The protection of the environment against actions that transcend shire boundaries would be under the jurisdiction of the state government, which would deal with entire watersheds and with air pollution (to the extent possible, given the fact that we are captives of the Midwest with its coal-generated power plants).

Without going into a lot of details, I invite you to think about the idea of recreating local government in a way that makes it possible to finally bring back the power that has slipped away to the central government. Think about recreating in your localities a true democratically governed polity, where the decisions are made by people who care about how they live and how they are governed, where the decisions are made by neighbors, not by distant functionaries whom no one knows.

Unless we do this, even in a small state like mine, we are in real danger of losing the essential ingredient of citizenship: the attachment and the loyalty of the citizen to his or her own little polity, where he or she counts for something. It's a community where citizens know their fellow citizens, greet them at the drugstore or the post office or the landfill, and interact with them through the Cub Scout troop, the church, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Extension Service, or

any of the activities that form the foundation of community life. To the extent it is possible, those decisions about how our community operates need to be brought back home.

Just as during the Vietnam War the cry was "Bring the boys back home," we are saying in *The Vermont Papers*, "Bring government back home," "Bring citizenship back home," or perhaps more appropriately, "Allow citizenship to flourish once again in a small, human-scale, democratic society where it has its only chance of being meaningful in the lives of the people and in the life of the republic we live in."

—1989