The Community Action Principle

Subjects Not Objects

Barney Frank

When community action was put into federal law in the early sixties as part of the effort to combat poverty and social injustice, I supported it intellectually. But I do not think that at the time I fully understood how important it was and how much of a change it would mean in the way in which we govern ourselves.

That understanding came a few years after the legislation creating the Model Cities Program, the Office of Economic Opportunity, and other efforts that mandated genuine community participation. In the early spring of 1968, I had just begun my job as Executive Assistant to newly elected Boston Mayor Kevin White. Motivated by the spirit of participation embodied in these earlier acts, tenants in Boston public housing formed an association and began to press for inclusion in the decision-making process of the Boston Housing Authority. One consequence of that was a decision by Mayor White to appoint a public housing tenant to the five-member board that governed the Authority. Another was a decision by the tenants' group to request that the summer jobs that had traditionally been assigned to the BHA and paid for with BHA funds be made available to the tenants, with the tenant groups selecting teenage residents of each development to be the summer employees. The previous pattern had been for politicians to divide up these highly desirable patronage jobs, with half of the jobs going to the Mayor, and the other half divided equally among the five Authority members.

When the tenants proposed that to Mayor White, as a supporter of the community action concept, he agreed with them and instructed me to tell the members of the Housing Authority that he wished to comply with this. Dutifully, in the naïve expectation that I was about to do something that everyone would recognize as a "good thing," I called one of the Housing Authority leaders to tell him that these were the Mayor's wishes. He was distinctly displeased. He pointed out to me that these were among the best patronage jobs around, and that he thought the Mayor was "nuts" to be giving them up, and "even more nuts" if he thought that the Housing Authority Board members would agree to relinquish theirs.

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Bent on accomplishing the mission I had been given by my boss, I thought I could persuade my BHA member to change his mind by noting that if we turned these jobs over to residents of the Authority — they were essentially summer housekeeping jobs involving grass cutting, litter removal and so on — we would not only be helping the tenants who were the intended beneficiaries of the public housing programs, we would be likely to get better performance since teenagers who lived in the buildings and whose work was being monitored by other family members would probably be more diligent than other teenagers from outside the developments who were being given these jobs because of family political connections. This only made him more incredulous: "Barney, Barney," he told me in a tone of great exasperation, "don't you know that if these [bleeping] people were any good they wouldn't be living in public housing in the first place." In the end, the Mayor did go ahead with his decision and turned the thirty jobs he traditionally was assigned by the Authority over to the tenants, and the one member he had appointed did the same, so 60 percent of the jobs went to the tenants and 40 percent stayed with the patronage pool. And I learned exactly why the principle of community action was so necessary, and why I could expect there to be a great deal of resistance to it from people whose control over programs aimed at helping the poor was being jeopardized by it.

Before this learning experience, I had assumed that with regard to programs that sought to help people out of poverty, the political world was essentially divided into two camps: conservatives who opposed these for a variety of reasons, and liberals who supported them. My assumption had been that those in the latter category, including Democratic mayors and others in the cities where many of these programs had a major impact, would be pleased to incorporate the community action idea as a logical extension of the notion that we should be helping poor people. It is, after all, fairly obvious that if you wish to maximize your efforts to provide assistance to any particular group of people, working closely with them and getting their significant input into the decisions being made is important. But what my early experiences in Boston taught me was that those who supported the existence of these programs were, in fact, themselves divided into two groups. For many of those who had historically supported welfare programs in the broadest sense, it was perfectly reasonable to enact legislation in which poor people were the objects of efforts to assist them. But when others suggested that the poor should not simply be the objects of these programs but also the subjects — that they should be actively involved in shaping the programs, making decisions about how to spend the money, and so on — some of the previous supporters reconsidered.

In some cases, this resistance to community action was motivated by the sort of self-interest evinced by the Housing Authority member I referred to above. In other cases, there was a genuine cultural perception problem. In the sixties, the view of poor people, particularly members of minority groups, as not being fully competent to make important economic, social, and political decisions was still widespread. To Mayor Richard Daley, it was one thing for him to be given money and legal authority to help the poor. It was quite another for the poor themselves to be strengthened in their ability to contest with him over how things should be done in Chicago.

Incorporating community action principles into social programs, therefore, was not simply a matter of increasing the efficiency of those delivery systems. It represented a very profound change in our politics, and was an essential step toward democratizing the way in which we govern ourselves.

Today, many people take for granted the notion that people whose lives are going to be very heavily affected by public policies should have a say in how they are formulated and carried out. Forty years ago, this was a much more controversial notion, and the condescending attitudes toward people of lower income that I have alluded to were, unfortunately, fairly widely held, even among people who considered themselves advocates for the alleviation of poverty.

The institution of community action principles — of directly involving people affected by these programs in their administration — has had several very important effects. First, it has led to an improvement in the way in which the programs work. This should not be surprising to anyone who is a supporter of the fundamental principle of democracy because it represents an application of that principle to a subset of governmental decisions. A.D. Lindsay, the British political philosopher, wrote in defense of democracy at a time when that was a hotly contested mode of governance in the world, confronting national socialism, communism, and fascism in a competition for legitimacy. In one of the few examples in my experience of a metaphor that helps rather than hinders understanding, Lindsay invoked the "shoe-pinching" argument, namely that you cannot know where the shoe pinches unless you ask the person who is wearing it. My own experience has been that the community action principle has in line with this been especially important in our effort to diminish racial tensions in our big cities. Prior to the community action principle being adopted, it was common for racial and ethnic minorities to feel frozen out of the process by which they were governed. Remember that at the mid-sixties — and for some time afterwards — the norm was for elected officials to be overwhelmingly white. Before the advent of African American and Hispanic mayors, county commissioners and other important administrators, it was through the community action elements of various programs that racial minorities got a chance to participate in a real way in the decisions that had so much impact on them.

In addition to the role that community action principles have had in the administration of those programs of which they were a part, it has also helped us move toward a better application of democratic principles for the society at large. In many cases, the first chance members of minority groups got to exercise significant influence over government decisions came through community action mechanisms. Again, the attitudes that prevailed toward lower-income people for much of American history are relevant. Forty years ago and before, it was common for people to have a low opinion of the capacity for people of lower income, especially racial minorities, to govern themselves. This was rarely articulated so bluntly, outside of the South, but it was an important attitudinal factor. And as is often the case, this sense that poor people weren't fully to be trusted with important governmental power was not simply an attitude held by others, but was internalized by many of the poor themselves. For many people, their lack of education, their self-consciousness about their socio-economic status, and other factors inhibited their own willingness to participate in the political process. It was the experience of making these decisions through community action organizations, first with other people of a similar background, that helped them realize that there were no reasons whatsoever why they should not play a broader political role in the issues that were important to them.

While some of the prejudices and attitudes that were prevalent when community action was first instituted are no longer nearly as virulent as they once were, the importance of making certain that people affected by governmental programs have a direct role in them has not diminished. In fact, in some ways, mechanisms to insure this kind of broad popular participation have become more important. We face a very important challenge today with regard to our economy. There is a strong consensus — not just within the United States but increasingly internationally — about the merits of the free enterprise system as the best way to increase wealth. I share that view, and I think it is important to note that support for the free enterprise system means accepting the need for some inequality in our economic system.

Unless people are unequally rewarded according to how hard they work, how cleverly they think of ways to meet public needs, how good they are at knowing — or even guessing — what consumer preferences would be, and so on, we do not have the proper incentives in place, and the distribution of resources will be less than perfect. But it is also clear that left entirely untouched by public policy, the capitalist system will produce more inequality than is socially healthy or than is necessary for maximum efficiency. Intellectually, devising policies that rein in excesses of inequality without interfering with the operation of incentives is fairly easily done. Nobel Prizes in economics have, in fact, been won by economists who work on exactly this sort of policy approach.

Unfortunately, recently in America, this has become hard to do politically. For nearly fifty years, from Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal until the election of Ronald Reagan, we had a growing and ultimately solid consensus in America that it was appropriate for the federal government to provide support for the operation of the free enterprise system while also maintaining a decent social safety net for those who, often but not always through no fault of their own, would not be able to lead lives of minimum decency unaided. And then came the presidency of Ronald Reagan, with his determination to return to a pre–New Deal approach in which we essentially counted on the free enterprise system by itself to take care of all of the needs of all of the people. President Reagan's initial approach to this was resisted, and indeed under President Clinton we made significant strides back toward the post–New Deal view. The notion that it is possible both to sustain the free enterprise system and to provide for the needs of those who are not well served by the results of capitalism was vindicated by the passage of the Clinton tax increase in 1993, when a Democratic Congress, at President Clinton's urging, passed a tax bill that raised taxes predominately on wealthy people. We were told at the time by conservatives that this would lead to economic decline, because we were increasing the tax burden on precisely those who were the most productive people in our economy. They argued that it was impossible simultaneously to sustain a vigorous and growing free market and provide a significant degree of social welfare.

They were very wrong. The Clinton tax increase — which was an increase in taxes primarily on upper-income people — not only made the tax code more nearly progressive, it preceded one of the most productive economic periods in American life. That is, the experience of the nineties established conclusively that it was possible to work at diminishing the excesses of inequality and to have significant economic growth simultaneously. But the elections of 2000 and 2002 have put those who reject this synthesis back into power.

It is because the fight against the harshest aspects of unrestricted capitalism is therefore a political problem and not an intellectual one that community action remains so essential.

The economic theory widely shared by the Bush administration and its Republican Congressional allies essentially consigns lower income people to the same passive economic role they were expected to have politically and socially in the pre-community action era. Economic progress in this view comes from essentially removing all restraints on capital. The Bush policy-makers and their supporters believe that if the owners of capital are free to invest it with little or no taxation, minimal regulation, and no interference from labor unions, consumer groups, lawyers on behalf of people injured by products, and others, we will all ultimately be better off. In this view, the role of the great majority of Americans is simply to buy the products produced, work happily for their wages, and leave all of the significant economic decisions to the capitalists. In other words, workers, consumers, and citizens in general simply ought to be objects here as the poor were expected to be in the administration of federal programs prior to the institution of community action principles.

In some ways this closes a historical circle. Community action was written into federal law in various ways beginning in the sixties, as part of a move toward a more active federal government seeking to combat extreme economic inequality and racism. Today, it is time to borrow from the principles of community action to help revive our broader efforts to fight excessive inequality. Today, for many citizens, it is not an impersonal federal bureaucracy that treats them arbitrarily and expects them to suffer in silence, but various aspects of the corporate world where the exercise of private economic power impinges on their autonomy while they have increasingly little recourse.

Moreover, while it is important to push for these sorts of changes within the United States, the motivating principle of community action — that people should be allowed a chance meaningfully to participate in decisions that affect their lives — has now become increasingly relevant in the international economic sphere. Until a few years ago, international economic policy was ruled by what was called the "Washington consensus," which posited that it was a good thing to improve the lot of the world's poor, but essentially treated them as objects and not subjects just as pre-community action politics in America did. Beginning approximately fifteen years ago, and with increasing force, many of us have been arguing that the goal of substantially diminishing worldwide poverty will not be accomplished until this changes, and those making international economic policy begin to include those people who are its intended beneficiaries. This is harder to do in some ways when we are dealing with international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank, and the other development banks, but it is not impossible, and many of us have spent a good deal of time and effort in trying to make community action principles operational in the international economic context. One specific example came in 1993 and 1994, when the Subcommittee on International Financial Institutions of the House Banking Committee, as it was then called, withheld support for funding for the World Bank from the United States until the bank agreed to set up procedures enabling residents of areas where the World Bank was contemplating funding development projects to make objections on environmental, economic, or social grounds. We succeeded in getting the bank to create an inspection panel which has now intervened on several occasions to stop projects precisely because the local people were able to make effective cases against them. We have also succeeded in changing the policies of the International Monetary Fund, which imposed severe economic austerity programs in various countries as a condition of IMF help, with no local political input. We have a long way to go in achieving the sort of popular participation in the formulation of international economic policy that ought to exist, and there will always be constraints in the international sphere that will make this less direct than in any one country's domestic politics. But the general principle is the same. Capitalism works better from every perspective when the economic decision-makers are forced to share power with those who will be affected by those decisions. Community action is as valuable a principle on the international level as it has been domestically.