Regional Recap: A Wide-Ranging Symposium On Regional Governance

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Regional recap

A wide-ranging symposium on regional governance

One of the hottest topics among would-be reformers of local government — the movement toward regional governance — had a full airing at an ambitious UB Law School symposium.

Participants in the symposium, titled "Regionalism: Promise and Problems," looked at a variety of perspectives on what a regional approach can and cannot accomplish. From disciplines as varied as law and economics, urban studies and history, the presenters addressed some of the social aspects which underlie any political system, and which are especially powerful at the local government level.

The symposium took note of such factors as racial and economic disparities among nearby communities, the tensions between cities and their suburbs, and a case study of regional planning in two areas of Canada, including Toronto. The proceedings of the symposium will be published as a special issue of the Buffalo Law Review.

Georgette C. Poindexter, an associate professor in both the business and law schools of the University of Pennsylvania, spoke in detail about her research on the city of Norristown, Pa., near Philadelphia. Norristown, she said, has a significant proportion of residents below the poverty line, yet it is situated in Montgomery County, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. "City and suburbs are often cast as opposing warriors," Poindexter said. "But their economies are inextricably linked."

One challenge for regionalism proponents, she said, is that issues of governance often are cast as city vs. suburbs. But as first-ring suburbs begin to confront the problems of crime, education and decaying housing stock that long have beset their inner-city neighbors, it may become more possible to create alliances to work on those common problems.

Poverty, Poindexter said, is far from an urban problem exclusively. Citing 1997 statistics, she said the U.S. poverty rate was 13.3 percent, or 36.6 million people. Of those, 27.3 million lived in metropolitan areas, but 43 percent of those lived outside city boundaries. In other words, there are a lot of poor people in the suburbs — it is just that their concentration is diluted among the suburban population.

"Because it lacks the critical mass of urban poverty, it flies below the radar screen of many suburban politicians," she said.

And there are political realities, Poindexter said, to even the best-intentioned efforts to regionalize government in an effort to improve people's economic lives. "Whether we can prove it empirically or not," she said, "federally subsidized Section 8 housing has a bad reputation among average suburban residents. To some people, Section 8 residents violate their idea of hard work through which they have been able to achieve life in the suburbs. As one suburban mayor stated when Section 8 housing was proposed for his area, 'My constituents have been able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps here. People resent it when the government tries to make someone their economic equivalent by subsidizing them.'"

Said Harvard University Law School Professor Gerald Frug, "There is a problem in America: concentrated poverty and, I should add, concentrated wealth. The question is, what are we going to do about it?"

Complete centralization of government functions, he contended, is not the answer. "What we need is a third way between centralization and fragmentation," Frug said. "We need to build institutions that enable different communities to deal with each other not as sovereign nations. We need to think about how we can knit together the community in ways that do not require a centralized government. I just do not believe we are going to have a centralized government in any of these regions."

"I think we need alliances that don't imagine people only geographically, but see them as interested in many things — and then allow them to have some amount of decentralized power without creating mini-states." For example, he cited one city in which both inner-city residents and far-flung farmers were concerned about suburban sprawl, thus creating the possibility of an effective alliance between quite disparate groups.
What we need is a **third way** between centralization and fragmentation.

John B. Sheffer II, director of UB's Institute for Governance and Regional Growth

Harvard University Professor Gerald Frug