

# A Chronicle of Civic Renewal: The *National Civic Review* in the 1990s

BY MICHAEL MCGRATH

In November of 1994, when more than 700 participants gathered in Philadelphia for the 100th Annual National Conference on Governance, the event had a double purpose. One was to celebrate the centennial of the National Civic League. The other was to discuss an ambitious, new national initiative to “link, support and multiply” grassroots innovations and problem-solving initiatives in cities, towns and regions across the country, the Alliance for National Renewal.

The Fall-Winter issue of the *National Civic Review* collected a symposium of articles based on remarks from the Philadelphia conference, entitled “Conversations on Renewal.” The lead article was an essay by John W. Gardner, chairman of the National Civic League. A former president of the Carnegie Foundation, Gardner served as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare during the Johnson Administration. In 1970, he founded the political reform group Common Cause, 2 years before the Watergate break-in. Considered a visionary in the world of philanthropy and nonprofits, Gardner was a prime mover behind the “Alliance for National Renewal” initiative. In his essay, he ticked off a list of the difficult challenges facing American communities:

One could speak at length of the problems that afflict the nation—unemployment, housing, our \$4.5 trillion debt, environmental degradation, a decaying infrastructure, a troubled educational system, international crises. Our infant mortality rate is the second highest in the developed world—twice that of Japan. Only Portugal ranks higher. Over 20 percent of American children are growing up in poverty. The corrupting role of money in politics, the scandals involving Members of Congress, the gridlock produced by fierce partisanship and intransigent vested interests—all have contributed to a pervasive cynicism.<sup>1</sup>

It was the sheer magnitude of these challenges, Gardner wrote, that argued for a national alliance of community building groups and civic sector organizations. “The National Civic League would serve as convener, but it would engage a long list of other groups and associations. These groups would be autonomous and they will follow their own diverse agendas. They are concerned with the whole range of problems on the domestic front. Thus, the Alliance for National Renewal has its roots deep in the soil of our troubled communities.”<sup>2</sup>

“We have had exposure to all the significant ingredients needed for a good future. We know the technical and administrative problems of local government. We know the constituencies that must be brought into partnership at the local level—corporations, unions, ethnic groups, churches, foundations, neighborhood associations, citizen activist groups. We know the people who are producing the significant innovations. And we know from long experience how to engage all of the relevant groups in collaborative problem solving.”<sup>3</sup>

The good news, said Gardner, was what he described as a “wave of innovation in grassroots problem-solving “that covers virtually every relevant topic—prenatal care, parent education, school-linked services, school-to-job programs, affordable housing, conflict resolution, and so on. It represents an astonishing burst of vitality. Of course, such good news is hard to believe, given the unvarnished horror stories we read every day. But it is happening across this country. The innovators represent a great diversity of racial, religious, and occupational backgrounds.

Because their work was often at the local or community-level, however, these efforts rarely received the kind of attention they deserved.”<sup>4</sup>

So, despite a roaring economy, Americans were “uneasy, and these virtually unknown men and women are working on some of the sources of that uneasiness: the senseless violence, the obscenity of racial hatred, the collapse of human dignity under extremes of poverty, the abduction of children, 11-year-olds dealing crack, sixth-grade children having children—in short, a shredding of the social fabric. Reweaving the fabric calls for just the sort of grass-roots activity described above—work with dysfunctional families, school-to-work programs, creating jobs, building community with its shared values, and so on. It’s slow work. It’s hard work in the heat of the day. But it must be done.”<sup>5</sup>

Gardner’s essay, which would be published as stand-alone booklet, sold more than 100,000 copies, mostly through the networks of the emerging Alliance for National Renewal.

### The Renewal Decade

In an essay in the *New York Times*, the writer Kurt Anderson once described the 1990s as “the best decade ever.” Between 1992 and 1999, he pointed out, the economy grew at an average annual rate of 4 percent. Household income also grew and the unemployment rate was cut in half. “By the end of the decade, in fact, there was so much good news—a federal budget surplus, dramatic reductions in violent crime (the murder rate in the United States declined by 41 percent) and in deaths from HIV/AIDS—that each astounding new achievement didn’t quite register as miraculous,” he wrote.<sup>6</sup>

For me, the 1990s will always be the decade of a great civic awakening, a time when some of the nation’s leading doers and thinkers were developing new ideas about community building, civic engagement, democratic governance, youth development, environmental sustainability, and collaborative problem solving. And some of the best writing on the subject appeared in the pages of this journal—the *National Civic Review*.

But as the decade began, the American public was in an anxious and sour mood. An economic recession had set in after much of the country’s manufacturing sector had already vanished during an earlier recession, leaving some fading factory towns in the

industrial Midwest, New England, and parts of the South with double digit rates of unemployment. The tenor of American politics was off-putting and unserious. Voter turnouts were inching toward record lows.

The 1988 presidential election between Vice President George Bush and Massachusetts Governor Michal Dukakis had been a depressing spectacle, most notable, in the words of one midwestern newspaper editor, for the enduring images of a “skulking Willie Horton, Bush in a Flag Factory, and Dukakis grinning goofily from an armored vehicle, the oversized helmet making him look like one of those wobbly headed sports dolls on the dashboard of a pickup truck.”<sup>7</sup> Only 50.1 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the presidential election, the lowest rate of participation since Herbert Hoover faced off against Al Smith in 1928.

### Collaborative Problem-Solving

When the “rabble rousing civic reformers” who founded the National Civic League (as the National Municipal League) met in Philadelphia in 1894, wrote Christopher T. Gates, the vice president of the league in 1991, they had two major purposes in mind. “The first was to professionalize local government,” he wrote, “at the time a morass of favoritism, deal making, and nepotism largely controlled by partisan political bosses. In just over a decade the organization developed the first-ever model city charter, created the council-manager form of government, and thus oversaw the birth of a profession called city management.”<sup>8</sup>

The second purpose or theme discussed by the founders was “self-government” at the local level. “Simply put, (Theodore) Roosevelt and his colleagues felt that traditional forms of representative democracy worked well at the state and local levels,” he wrote. “It made sense for voters to place their trusts, in effect to give up their proxy, to those who represented them in Washington or in the state capitals. But, the league’s founders cautioned, it wasn’t enough at the local level simply to vote every 2 years and feel as if commitment to community had been fulfilled. They felt that communities had to take responsibility for themselves, that individual citizens, businesses and community groups needed

to find ways to help improve the quality of life of their communities.”<sup>9</sup>

It was this second purpose or theme of the founding conference—self-government—that was to become the central mission of the National Civic League as it prepared the groundwork for the Alliance for National Renewal. “More than ever,” wrote Gates, who would later serve as league president, “communities are being forced to find new and creative ways to meet the challenges before them. The realities facing community problem solvers have never been so complex or so difficult. Communities clearly require new approaches to deal with the issue of present and future. Unless communities recognize that the context for local problem solving has changed, it is unlikely that they will be able to respond appropriately.”<sup>10</sup>

#### A View from Main Street

In the summer of 1991, the Kettering Foundation released an influential and widely read research report, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*. Compiled by the Harwood Group, a public issues research firm in Bethesda, Maryland, the report came to the novel conclusion that Americans weren’t, as many observers believed, apathetic or uninterested in politics and policy-making. Rather, they were angry.

Almost immediately after the 70-page report was released, “three secretaries in the Foundation’s Washington office had to help handle calls from people requesting copies,” David Mathews noted in a 1991 article in the *National Civic Review*. “More than 30,000 copies were mailed to citizens’ organizations, political parties, members of Congress, state legislators, mayors and city councils, departments of political science, the White House, labor unions, and the Bank of Japan. By late August, more than 1,000 newspaper articles and editorials had appeared in nine countries.”<sup>11</sup>

For a foundation report, this was tantamount to best-seller status, and far from being a flash in the pan, the “Main Street” report, as it came to be known, would be served as one of the essential documents of what some social scientists would later describe as a “civic renewal movement.” Today, the

idea that citizens are angry rather than apathetic would hardly seem novel, but in the early 1990s, it was something of a revelation.

“The conventional wisdom that people are apathetic about politics is dead wrong,” wrote Mathews. “Richard Harwood let citizens talk long enough to get beyond the usual complaints about big government and bad politicians. He heard citizens who were deeply angry—not apathetic—at being pushed out of the political system by a professional political class for interest group lobbyists, overly incumbent politicians, and the media.”<sup>12</sup>

“Why the public outrage?” he continued. “Evidently, people from all walks of life still believe that this should be a nation not simply of people and for the people, but by the people as well. The democratic impulse we have seen around the world appears to resonate with some Americans, too.”

What the findings in *Citizens and Politics* suggested, wrote Mathews, was much more alarming than the usual complaints about politics. “They do not believe their votes control the system anymore. They believe that money and the influence of powerful groups control the system. Therefore, they conclude that there is no point in voting, or—worse yet—they decide it is better not to vote. When asked why he didn’t vote, one man in California said, ‘It’s simple. I don’t want to encourage them.’ People are ‘voting’ not to vote. A wave of public cynicism about the political system threatens the legitimacy of government at all levels.”<sup>13</sup>

But if people were cynical about and turned off by organized politics, that didn’t mean they weren’t engaged in public life. At the community level, in collective problems-solving efforts, there was plenty of activism. “When citizens see that they can get their hands on a problem, they sense that there is some possibility they can make a difference, and so they tend to get more involved. They become political producers rather than consumers.”<sup>14</sup>

#### Citizens and Co-Production

The idea of citizens as “producers” rather than consumers was echoed in the groundbreaking work of another author whose writing appeared in the

*National Civic Review* in the early 1990s, Elinor Ostrom, a professor at the University of Indiana. Ostrom, the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for Economics, was acclaimed for her work in institutional theory and common pool resource problems. Studying natural resource systems such as waters supplies and fisheries, she and her fellow researchers discovered that the successful ones were not necessarily the results of government regulation or private ownership but voluntary associations between users who created their own rules and mechanisms for insuring the sustainability of the resource. Ostrom believed that citizens and government should work together to “co-produce” the services and structures of governance that communities needed to thrive.

In 1993, her article “A Communitarian Approach to Local Governance,” which appeared in the summer issue of the review, she wrote: “The way that production and consumption are organized in communities affects the incentives or disincentives among users to participate actively as co-producers of services. “Unless public officials and the suppliers of services take into account the aspirations and preferences of the people they serve, they are apt to encounter reticent citizens who consider themselves victims of exploitation rather than active participants in collaborative efforts to realize joint outcomes. Co-production has a strong potential relationship to efficiency as well as local self-governance.”<sup>15</sup>

Today, citizens have fewer opportunities for direct participation in the larger, formal institutions of government. They need recourse to a variety of activating institutions organized as voluntary associations and functioning as civic associations, interest groups, political parties, neighborhood associations, and church congregations. Citizens in many communities across the United States and in other countries do take an active role in the governance of their own communities, far from the attention of the national media. Institutions of self-governance depend on the development of a science and art of association whereby citizens share with one another in human communities. Formal units of government are those non-voluntary associations that are more permanently established by law to administer the affairs associated with

identifiable territory. Their operation in a democratic society depends on their being nested in rich configurations of voluntary activities. Voluntary associations, often labeled ‘private,’ serve crucial public purposes.

In many communities, institutions that might be considered strictly private are effectively governing and managing local common-pool resources and providing sustainable infrastructures. The equation of “public” and “government” with “central government” implies a neglect of the substantial role of individual citizens in public life.<sup>16</sup>

“We need to recognize, then, that local government in a democratic society cannot be confined only to what transpires in particular corporate entities or agencies identified as units of government,” wrote Ostrom. “This is why it may be more useful to refer to ‘government structures’ than ‘governments,’ or, in an even more disabling way, ‘the government.’ The process of governance refers to a much larger universe of discourse both inside and outside of formal government units, not merely what proceeds within the walls of a particular unit.”<sup>17</sup>

“The need for co-production applies to the maintenance of physical facilities and ways of life in human communities,” she concluded. “If neighbors do not know one another and they live in high rise buildings without adequate security, halls, and stairways become a “no man’s land” where predators prey upon others. Neighborhood streets are subject to the same “tragedy of the commons.” Appropriate institutional arrangements for cooperative housing and neighborhood governance are necessary to facilitate co-productive efforts for monitoring and exercising control over public spaces. We need to mobilize the analytical capabilities that address themselves to the reality of life in the neighborhoods if we are to understand the patterns of destruction that have occurred in some of these settings. Populations that reach into the hundreds of thousands—or even millions of people—cannot be governed from City Hall, let alone the White House. They must govern themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Making Democracy Work**

Why do some democratic governments succeed and others fail? This was a question the political

scientist Robert Putnam set out to explore in his 1992 book, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. In 1970, the Italian government decided to create a wholly new set of regional governments, each with the same structure, formal power, and base of financial support. Putnam decided that comparing the performance of these governments would prove illuminating.

“It soon became clear that despite their identical form,” wrote Putnam in the Spring 1993 issue of the *Civic Review*, “these various regional governments worked very differently. As we had expected, some of them proved to be utter failures—inefficient, slothful, corrupt. Others, however, were very effective—creating innovative day care centers, industrial parks, job programs, family clinics, environmental programs, and the like. Citizens in latter regions enjoyed better government than many Americans.”<sup>19</sup>

Putnam and his colleagues considered the different possibilities: wealth, education, party politics, urbanization, social stability, among other factors. “None of these answers fit the facts,” he wrote. “None was directly correlated with government performance. The right answer surprised us, though it likely would not have surprised Alexis de Tocqueville, that astute nineteenth century French observer of democracy in America: What best predicted good government in Italian regions was choral societies, soccer clubs, and cooperatives. In other words, some regions were characterized by a dense network of civic associations and an active culture of civic engagement, whereas others were characterized by vertical client-patron relations of exploitations and dependence, not horizontal collaboration among equals.”<sup>20</sup>

These networks, Putnam believed, had deep historical roots. Roughly speaking, the parts of medieval Italy where order and government was established by Norman barons and monarchs had poorly developed civic associations. The governing structures in those regions were vertical and exploitative. “Meanwhile, in a band of cities stretching across north central Italy from Venice to Bologna to Florence to Genoa, a very different solution was invented to address the same problem of social order. Instead of vertically structured system of kings, barons,

knights and peasants, however, small groups of neighbors in the north began to form mutual self-protection pacts.”<sup>21</sup>

“Town governments were actually formed out of these horizontally organized mutual aid associations,” Putnam wrote. “So successful was this idea of horizontal collaboration that the principal began to spread to other spheres of social activity. In economic life—guilds were invented—associations among equals for mutual professional benefit.” Soon, a web of horizontal associations evolved—neighborhood associations, religious fraternities, and, of course, choral societies. “These communal republics soon created remarkably advanced systems of government, with the medieval equivalent of professional city managers, modern laws, marketable public securities, and so on.”<sup>22</sup>

To explain the disparities between well-managed and poorly managed governments, Putnam employed a little known social scientific term—“social capital.” Communities and neighborhoods with ample social capital, the human relationships, and civic capacities that are built up over time, tend to be more successful and livable than those with less. Years later, Putnam would popularize the concept of social capital with an essay and subsequent book called *Bowling Alone*, in which he warned of the decline of associational life and membership organizations (and thus social capital) and how that might affect democracy. But the basic ideas he would later explore in his widely read book, *Bowling Alone*, were first laid out in *Making Democracy Work*, his exploration of civic traditions and governance in Italy. The concept of social capital would prove to be an important concern for the civic revival movement in the 1990s and early 2000s.

### **Making a Case for American Renewal**

As the National Civic League was approaching its centennial, the board and staff were focused on how the organization could have as great an impact on contemporary problems of governance as it had historically as a promoter of Progressive Era Municipal Reform. For more than 40 years, the organization had recognized communities for outstanding civic accomplishments through its All-America City Awards. Since 1987, it had offered



technical assistance to communities undertaking long-range, participatory planning or problem-solving initiatives through its civic assistance program, and it had helped spark a nationwide “healthy communities movement” movement through its partnerships with the U.S. Health Agency.

“NCL’s second century agenda is founded on our stunning success in advocating, promoting, and assisting in the establishment of an effective, efficient, and responsive public sector, monitored and periodically reformed by an ever watchful, informed, and engaged public,” wrote editor David Lampe and publisher John Parr in their introduction to the Winter-Spring 1994 issue of the review. “As NCL undertakes to reaffirm its mission, it calls upon the nation to redouble its commitment to social equity and collective progress. In short, NCL advocates a broadly-based, multi-sectoral initiative to enlist every American and every institution—public, private, and nonprofit—in a nationwide movement called American Renewal.”<sup>23</sup>

To write a call for action in this new movement (the name of the initiative was later changed to National Renewal), Lampe and Parr recruited Neal Peirce, a syndicated, urban affairs columnist with the Washington Post Writers Group. Peirce and another civic league supporter, Curtis Johnson, had written the book, *CitiStates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World*. The book made a strong argument for a new kind of civic regionalism in which citizens in urban areas and surrounding suburbs worked together to promote economic well-being and equity in a more competitive, globally integrated era.

“Reach into almost any community in the United States and you will discover the need for an American Renewal,” wrote Peirce. “There’s the single mother, who is weary, bouncing from welfare to work and back. She knows she’s nobody’s cause. She still cares, mostly for her two children, and hopes and wonders about the future. She exemplifies the failings of a system that no longer works for many Americans. But no one is asking for her advice about how to change it.”<sup>24</sup>

The essay goes on to describe other anxious characters—the business executive facing a

corporate restructuring and loss of a job, the beleaguered city manager who realizes that challenges his community faces are too complex to rely on old ideas about public administration, the farmer facing unstable prices and a crushing mortgage, the newspaper editor fearing closure or a buyout, the labor leader losing members and facing givebacks in the next contract, and the lonely retiree.

“Flipping through this catalogue of cynicism and despair, you might think the country is finished,” he wrote. “Yet, for every burned-out teacher who’s given up, there are a dozen others who still try hard, working against the odds of over-sized classes and expanding social demands on public education, all the while reminded that theirs is one of America’s system that no longer perform well.”<sup>25</sup>

The idea of the renewal movement would be to challenge the self-absorption, inertia, and complacency that threatened the nation’s prospect at every level—personal, commercial, and governmental. “The renewal must prompt personal and national mobilization to counter the forces that threaten to destroy the shining American birthright: cynicism and alienation, poverty and lawlessness, illiteracy and substance abuse, polluted natural environments, and socially ravaged cities.”<sup>26</sup>

In short, “We need new standards for civic life. We need a new social contract that says every citizen counts, not just at the ballot box, but at parent teacher meetings at schools, at committees to hammer out conflicts between growth and environmental conservation, and in neighborhoods to stop crime and save at-risk youth.”<sup>27</sup>

This was obviously going to be a tall order, but the National Civic League’s call for renewal was met with widespread interest. In May of 1994, about 130 people representing 50 different organizations met in Washington to discuss the need for an alliance. By the time of the 100th National Conference on Governance, more than 100 organizations had joined in, including AARP, The United Way of America, the League of Women Voters, the National Urban League, Common Cause, the National League of Cities and the International City/County Management Association. At its peak,

the alliance included more than 230 organizations and associations.

(This article is the first in a two-part series. The second part will appear in the fall issue of the *National Civic Review*).

#### Notes

1. Gardner, J. 1994. "National Renewal," *National Civic Review* 83(4):375.
2. Ibid., 375.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 374.
5. Ibid., 374–375.
6. Anderson, K. "The Best Decade Ever? The 1990s, Obviously," *New York Times*, February 6, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/opinion/sunday/the-best-decade-ever-the-1990s-obviously.html>.
7. Merritt, D. *Public Journalism and Public Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995), 80.
8. Gates, C. 1991. "Making a Case for Collaborative Problem-Solving," *National Civic Review* 80(2):113.
9. Ibid., 114.
10. Ibid., 115.
11. Mathews, D. 1991. "Putting the Public Back into Politics," *National Civic Review* 80(4):343.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 344.
14. Ibid., 348.
15. Ostrom, E. 1993. "A Communitarian Approach to Local Governance," *National Civic Review* 82(3):231.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 232.
18. Ibid.
19. Putnam, R. 1993. "What Makes Democracy Work?," *National Civic Review* 82(2):102.
20. Ibid., 103.
21. Ibid., 104.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid. 1994. "Editor's Comment," *National Civic Review* 83(1):3.
24. Pierce, N. "The Case for American Renewal," *National Civic Review* 83(1):9.
25. Ibid., 10.
26. Ibid., 12.
27. Ibid., 16.