Chapter 9

The First Step Toward a Better Governmental Structure

If history is a teacher, one observation about the structure of Cleveland's government 50 or 100 years hence seems certain—it will be different from today. In 1988, Cleveland will be obliged by its own city charter to re-examine its fundamental structure. It is neither premature nor radical to reflect on what changes are now appropriate.

First principles are important in designing political systems. One first principle is derived from inquiring whether Cleveland is to be primarily a place to work, shop, and be served or whether it is to be primarily a place to live and be educated. Those who built the government that Cleveland knows today did not clearly choose among those priorities. Many would contend that when push has come to shove, Cleveland's municipal government has not given residential needs the highest priority. After 1900, the city and suburbs chose different goals.

The suburbs emphasized the priorities of residence and education. Using zoning and restrictive covenants in deeds, the wealthiest suburbs established use districts, lot sizes, and building restrictions that attracted residents who could support city services, parks, and schools with only moderate help from taxing complementary retail facilities. Other suburbs with less affluent residents admitted office and industrial uses but never by sacrificing residential priorities. In the suburbs, business and industry were deliberately recruited as the handmaidens of municipal governments that served and were controlled by residential interests.

By 1900, the City of Cleveland had already demonstrated that only its most wealthy residents could protect themselves against the claims of commerce and industry. Starting in 1832, the city's industrial and commercial center grew from a small number of streets at "gravity point" in the flats until, after 1920, it surrounded the wealthy mansions between East 20th and East 40th Streets on Euclid Avenue. Those mansions were originally built on high land with unencumbered views of the lake. For a while, their occupants protected their residential preferences by assuring that the Euclid

125

streetcar line turned south at East 20th Street before heading past Prospect Avenue and not returning to Euclid Avenue until after East 40th Street. Eventually they deserted Euclid Avenue for Bratenahl, Cleveland Heights, East Cleveland, and other locations remote from the soot, noise, and ugliness of Cleveland's heavy industry.

So long as the central city was attractive for business expansion, only the blue collar and other non-managerial classes suffered from the preferences that Cleveland extended to business over residential interests. Even in 1980, when business expansion does not characterize the central city and when the central city is being abandoned as home even by blue collar families, the most audible concerns still are about Cleveland's future as a place for business. Much less is heard about Cleveland's future as a home for residents – the city's only enfranchised class.

Yet, the type of future government Cleveland chooses may well depend on where it places the relative priorities of residential and business interests. A city government that decreases the number of popularly elected representatives and centralizes its planning will be less responsive to residential concerns. A government that places its primary emphasis on downtown redevelopment, lakefront expansion, and industrial development in the Woodland-East area will be less able to create and implement a residential strategy for the Near West Side, Broadway-Miles, Hough-Fairfax or Old Brooklyn.

The suggestion that Cleveland restructure its municipal government into a federation of cities within a city is designed to allow residential interests to gain preference over industrial and commercial interests. So structured, the residents of those sub-cities might well see Cleveland's diminishing population as a blessing for successful residential living. They might devise municipal strategies that would allow for a permanent reduction of population density, preservation of existing dwellings and open spaces, and the re-creation of Cleveland more in the character of the urban villages elsewhere within the county.

This new Cleveland would have advantages not enjoyed, however, by Shaker Heights or Lakewood or East Cleveland. It would have the tax base of a still thriving central office and financial district, of relatively immobile and still viable heavy industry, and a growing industry built around medical care and

higher education. As occurs in the successful industry-laden City of Brooklyn, Cleveland's reduced population could harness its business assets to residential needs. The new Cleveland would be able to enlist the simultaneous energies of 15 or 20 sub-city mayors, more than 100 council representatives, and thousands of resident volunteers so that tax benefits from those businesses could enhance Cleveland as a better place to live.

It would, indeed, be a long-range strategy; but only by creating a stronger residential market in the central city will deterioration of its neighborhoods be abated, will retailing be restored, and will Cleveland continue to be an attractive home for industry. It seems remarkable that few analysts give prominence to the fact that successful businessmen do not tend to locate stores, plants, or offices near cities where employees or customers don't like to live. A long-range residential strategy may, moreover, be a necessary foundation for short-range tactics. The observation made by others seems entirely valid that, where a socio-economic problem is concerned, it takes as long to solve the problem as it did to create it. Cleveland's governmental problems have been apparent for more than six decades. They may require as long to solve.

The suggestion that the historic City of Cleveland be reconstituted within its existing boundaries as a two-tiered federation of new, smaller cities is offered as a starting point in a long-range strategy for restoring Cleveland as an attractive place to live as well as work. The idea is not intended as a definitive answer cast in bronze.

Instead, it is offered as a new way of thinking about an old problem. It does seem clear that, insofar as Cleveland's struggling neighborhoods and its warring politicians are concerned, the old arguments and the old analyses are wrong.

Cleveland's governmental problems will not be substantially solved by changing faces, reducing council representation, lengthening the term of mayor, or transferring primary municipal services to a larger government. Instead, Cleveland needs political stability, increased participation and representation of residents, a greater priority to residential interests, and executive strength to deal responsively with neighborhoods' requests. The proposal for restructuring a new Cleveland as a federation of smaller cities within the old Cleveland is merely one possible way of achieving those goals.

Only recently, in November 1980, Cleveland voters adopted four-year terms for the mayor and council representatives. Without question, longer terms will promote governmental stability and strengthen the mayor's powers. But will the mayor or council representatives have significantly more time to address localized problems in the neighborhoods? The experience of other cities with four-year terms suggests that there will be improvements but that the need for decentralization of power will still exist if neighborhood needs are to be addressed satisfactorily. Longer terms of office aim primarily to reduce the pressure of electioneering on official decision-making. Longer terms are not directed toward better serving localized needs of constituents.

What is most needed now is for those with knowledge and responsibility for Cleveland's government to begin to explore seriously how they can create a municipal government for Cleveland that delivers basic municipal services in a way that is more responsive to differing neighborhoods' needs and priorities, is more efficient, and has less city-wide conflict.

In exploring how Cleveland can reach those goals, it is important to have both a sense of history and a sense of the future. It is vital that we be practical about what has worked or failed and why.

Our sense of history should remind us that the problems of conflict, inefficiency, corruption, and unresponsiveness are not new. They have beset our city in a severe way for nearly a century. Reports documenting inefficiency have been made repeatedly, but no mayor has had the power to institute the most fundamental recommendations or to assure that implemented changes would be long maintained. The reason for failure lies not in the personalities but in the politics of city government.

Our sense of history should tell us that in the central city the old politics have undergone a great change. The city's ward structure emerged from an era when political parties were strong, mayors controlled their party (or vice versa), and ward leaders and precinct committeemen had real influence and great patronage. But in Cleveland a party mayor has not been elected in 40 years, and the ethnic politics has produced a sequence of mayors beginning with Frank Lausche who were above and, often, separate from party. There is today in Cleveland no ward leader who has real influence to wield or largess to dispense unless she or he is a paid or elected city official.

Our sense of reality should cause us to look closely at the strengths and philosophies of other governmental structures both in suburbia and in foreign countries. We should ask if the environment of municipal finance and economic growth which produced, nearly a century ago, what is essentially today's Cleveland government are the same considerations of finance and local economics which will govern Cleveland's future.

In 1900, Cleveland may have needed a broad base of public capital harnessed by a powerful mayor to protect residents against aggressive business monopolists. Today and tomorrow, Clevelanders may need a local government that can efficiently and effectively police its streets, fill its chuck holes, and catch stray dogs.

Our sense of reality should force us to examine closely whether in government bigger is always better and more efficient or whether smaller units are, in fact, superior for some purposes.

In considering the future, we should ask about the many neighborhood organizations which, since the 1930s, have grown to fill the gaps left by government. Are neighborhood identity and neighborhood organization a political factor which will in the future share an equal if not superior position to party, religion, and ethnicity? If party power has vanished and if ethnicity divides us, is it possible that neighborhood identity provides the political focus for greater cohesiveness and for more effective and responsive governmental action? Is the neighborhood, indeed, the foundation stone of local government that Lewis Mumford said was essential to managing the urban mass?

Lastly, in assessing proposals for change, we should ask how the power of the Tom Wagners, the residents of East 176th Street, or the Near West Side Neighbors in Action will be affected by any proposed change. If the change does not close the communications gap and build bridges of cooperation between such residents and the elected political officials having power to solve residential problems and if the change does not vest in the political officials real power to meet the resident's needs, any solution will be transient if not cosmetic.

Solutions which deal only in personalities, identify only managerial failures, and ask mainly for more money will be ineffective. The root problems are not personalities, and the managerial failures do not arise because of people with narrow minds or limited intelligence. The financial problem is as much one of how money

is managed as how much is raised. The root problems of Cleveland's city government are in the magnitude and variety of the services to be delivered, the number of individuals required to deliver them, the difficulties such delivery factors produce, and the way in which political power is allocated. In Cleveland, as in nearly every large city, the greatest power over local service delivery rests with the civil service bureaucracy, much less with elected officials, and least with city electors.

The first step toward a solution is to understand the practicalities of identifying the most localized problems, establishing priorities and procedures for their correction, and supervising performance of city personnel.

If, as I have attempted to demonstrate, we understand that the real failures are in the way resident needs are communicated upward through the elected political structure and the way elected officials establish priorities and monitor the performance of subordinate employees, we will at least know where to look in fashioning solutions to the continuing complaints about Cleveland's city government. If we understand that the root problems of Cleveland's city government are not ones of finance, management technique, race, or personality but are ones of politics, we will then ask the root questions about municipal politics—who talks to whom about solving what problems and who exercises real power?

It may be that serious examination of the issues I have raised will produce a solution that is different from the two-tiered structure I have proposed. That is not important. What is important is that the root problems be understood and that Clevelanders be unafraid to think boldly about the future.

In thinking boldly about the future, we must not be petty about the past. Cleveland is a great city—still abounding with resources and still populated by diverse people of many talents with demonstrated commitment to sound government. But Cleveland's present governmental structure permits only a handful to participate, fosters conflict when cooperation is necessary, and fails to deliver basic services at an acceptable level of quality or efficiency. An honest look at root questions, stripped of personalities and considering broadly Cleveland's past, is a necessary first step for fashioning Cleveland's municipal government into a workable democracy.