

Whither Portland....

Elsa's homework, 6/27/2018

I share with the rest of the group the dismay we feel when we look at the mounting challenges that Portland faces and the sense that things aren't working as they should. They are not.

I came to Portland 22 years ago, after 25 years in the Federal bureaucracy, excited to learn more about Oregon Shines and the Oregon Benchmarks which won a national award for innovation in government. Imagine government agencies being measured and held accountable for their public services! I was deeply disappointed when the effort died a few years later although it served as an important model for other governments in the U.S. and around the world.

In 1999/2000 at Bev Stein's request, I chaired a Citizen's Task Force on Mental Health Services in Multnomah County. We produced a visual "mess map" of how the system worked, where its problems were, and a blueprint for fixing it. Unfortunately Bev Stein left to run for Governor, and her successor, Diane Linn, went off in a different direction. The same mess exists today. See <http://stanford.edu/%7erhorn/a/kmap/mess/messPortlandmap.pdf>

In 2004 I volunteered (along with Ted Wheeler) to act as a "citizen volunteer" to review the City of Portland's budget for Tom Potter and was dismayed to see how dysfunctional that system was (and still is.) Good governance does not happen when the elected representatives have both legislative and executive powers (and inexperience to boot) and the Mayor has only one vote among five. I marvel that Goldschmidt and Katz were so successful.

I agree with Kim and others that the coup de grace to Portland's highly regarded public education system and other public services was Measure 5 together with a sense of panic among legislators about Oregon's competitiveness with other states in attracting and keeping businesses and jobs. So, in addition to losing property taxes, the state has gone on a binge of giving away its corporate tax base with tax credits, "enterprise zones," and other special deals (like Nike and Intel's tax extortion). The result is that corporations' gross receipt taxes have declined by nearly two-thirds since 1973-75 (from 18.5 percent of all Oregon income taxes to just 6.7 percent.) At the least corporations should be paying the same rate as their workers, which now many are not. The Trump Federal tax breaks are making it worse. A succession of Governors and legislative leaders have promised "tax reform", but are blocked by the PERS debate and plain inertia. How to untangle this critical "social mess"?

I do believe that democracy as we have practiced it is changing. Social media technologies can skewer voters in all kinds of nefarious ways. Voting itself has declined so much that elections are often decided by a fraction of the electorate. Civic education, though expanding thanks to anti-Trump efforts, is still anemic, especially at the local

level. Two issues that I care about—Portland’s antiquated city government structure and tax fairness in Oregon—are bogged down in a collective snit. One is just a bother—not sexy enough--who cares? The other is too hard to tackle, especially in an election year.

That is how I have been feeling. Then, along came the Irish to raise my hopes for the future! When I read about the success of their recent Citizens’ Assembly, I thought “Here’s something that Portland and Oregon can do!”

Using a collaborative voting process they call “deliberative democracy” they created an assembly of 99 citizens, a representative sample of the Irish population by age, gender, social class and region, which met together for eight weekends in a hotel in Dublin to study all sides of five important national issues and to vote their collective judgment. The most hot-button issue was repeal of the 8th amendment to their constitution banning abortion. To everyone’s surprise it was overturned by 64 percent.

Deliberative democracy, sometimes referred to as “dialogue”, has been around since the Greeks. It requires thoughtful, respectful listening to all sides of an issue before rendering judgment. In recent years its most prominent proponent was the late Daniel Yankelovitch, America’s leading pollster and public opinion analyst of the late 20th Century. He came to believe that the opinions he collected from polls and focus groups were not thoughtful opinions and could be swayed by too many forces. They were unwise to use to guide the development of public policy.

“Opinion polls just measure people’s unresolved, half-baked feelings and views,” he said. “The challenge is to help the public think through, deliberate, dissolve their own conflicts and finally reach considered judgment. From my view as a student of public opinion, converting raw opinion into considered judgment is indispensable to the efficient functioning of public democracy.”

That is what the Irish managed to do. It is not easy. But it is something that Portland can do as well. We could begin with an issue like the form of city government and put together a coalition of say City Club, PSU, League of Women Voters, etc. for a pilot. If it succeeds we could move to the state level and organize a statewide Citizens’ Assembly on fair taxes and education and money in politics, etc.

Just to note that the population of Ireland is 4.7 million and the population of Oregon is 4.1 million. If they can do it, why can’t we?

P.S. For background on the Irish process see <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens%27_Assembly_\(Ireland\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens%27_Assembly_(Ireland))