

## Preface

In choosing the title, *The Ungovernable City*, I have consciously joined a debate that has been underway for some time and that has been highlighted by the publication of two books with similar titles, Edward Banfield's *The Unheavenly City* and Norton Long's *The Unwalled City*.<sup>1</sup> Each book develops an argument about what is wrong with the city and about what might be done to alleviate urban policy problems. This book also develops such arguments. But my arguments are different, for I wish to identify a different source of urban problems and a different strategy for dealing with them.

The message of the book is evident in the title. I believe that the city problem is a problem of government, that the large American city is increasingly ungovernable, and that the only solution to the problem lies in a redefinition and restructuring of urban government.

In what follows I develop an analysis of the ungovernable city in a way that is quite different from the approaches taken by Professors Long and Banfield. I will combine an analysis of urban policy-making processes with an analysis of the nature of urban policy problems to illuminate the fundamental relationships between the structure of the city's governmental institutions and the process of urban problem solving. Both parts of the analysis take considerable space because both deal with intricate subjects.

The point of this approach is to make political analysis serve as a useful foundation for the analysis of policy problems and vice versa. I have long felt that the application of political analysis to public policy problems has suffered from two serious limitations. Either public policy analysis is primarily an analysis of governmental institutions with public policy language tacked on to suggest a concern for what the institutions actually do. Or it tends to be a straightforward analysis of different ways to solve a policy problem with little concern for the government structures out of which problems arise and which must be relied upon to implement the problem-solving strategy turned up by policy analysis.

The premise of this book is that we cannot understand the failure of urban problem solving without a clear understanding of the way that the urban policy-making system works. Indeed that system constitutes a great part of the original problem. At the same time

we cannot understand the character of the urban policy-making system without seeing how it is currently shaped by the nature of the problems it is trying to deal with and how it has evolved over time in response to the need to deal with a variety of different historical problems.

There are three further points that I wish to make at the outset about the character of my argument. First, I seek to explore both the political and administrative sides of urban government and, in particular, to focus on the politics of urban administration as it is expressed in the delivery of urban services. This focus is worth noting only because so much of urban analysis has proceeded on the basis of an analytical separation of urban politics and administration (or management). Until quite recently the available books on urban government dealt with urban administration—treatises on new techniques in urban management and strategies for increasing administrative efficiency. From a political point of view these books were arid; politics was something to be avoided in the name of municipal progress. From any point of view the classic texts on municipal administration failed to convey a vivid sense of the daily practice and perplexity of urban policy making.

Reacting against this tradition, Edward Banfield and James Wilson designed their influential book, *City Politics*, as a “political approach” to urban government.<sup>2</sup> Their approach led them to examine the roles of various political actors and interests in the city and to stress their strategies and behavior and the cleavages between them. In moving urban political analysis away from administrative principles and toward political behavior, Banfield and Wilson made the important contribution of making city politics appear to be a lively part of the American political system. But in so doing, they blurred the question of whether the urban system is distinctive—different in its political behavior and processes from other American governmental institutions. Curiously the earlier writers had at least underlined the special character of city government by emphasizing the city’s distinctive functions—sanitation, police administration, and the like.

My hope in this book is to unite the political and administrative understanding of city government in a way that both demonstrates the distinctiveness of the city as an administrative system and

sheds light on the causes and consequences of pluralist democracy in the American system. We cannot understand urban politics without understanding the character of urban service delivery. And we cannot understand the problems involved in the governance and control of urban services without understanding the extreme pluralism of urban politics. In this sense the "political" and the "administrative" are inevitably conjoined.

Second, this book draws heavily on the experience of New York City and New Haven in the last two decades. Both cities have been at the forefront of efforts to deal with urban problems, and both have attracted a disproportionate share of attention from urban scholars and policy analysts. If one draws on historical accounts of urban problems and policy making, as I have done heavily in this book, one finds that to an extraordinary extent one is constantly reading the history of New York City.

This book is also based to a large extent, and in ways that are not always evident, on my own personal experience in urban government. Different writers get their ideas and understandings in different ways. I know that I could not have written this book if I had not had the opportunity to observe at first hand the workings of the mayor's office in New York and New Haven, the office of Neighborhood Government in New York, the New York-Rand Institute, and the Connecticut Department of Community Affairs. It is because of this experience that I was drawn to examine and analyze what urban government looks like to the central policy makers in city hall. It is this experience that has given me whatever "feel" I may have for the internal workings of city government. Had I worked with the government of Detroit, Chicago, or Cleveland, my views of the ungovernable city might be somewhat different, but I do not think so. I believe that personal experience in government has value only if the interior perspective provides an organizing conception and synthesis of the interacting political forces and governmental features that are described with great care in the scholarly literature.

As a scholar, citizen, and sometime participant in urban government, I take no pleasure at all in making the pessimistic argument that the American city is fundamentally ungovernable in its present form. For all concerned, I wish that cities were easier to govern.

But I believe that we will never find durable solutions to urban problems if we do not take a hard and unflattering look at the present incapacity of urban government as a policy-making system. At this point in American urban history, surely only a compulsive optimist could overlook the distress signals emanating from city hall, which strongly suggest that the city has become the sick man of American government.