

# 1 **The New Metropolis**

2 by [Peter Drucker](#) in [Landmarks of Tomorrow](#)

3 The emergent industrial society has had another major impact on the foundations of  
4 government:

4 It erodes local government.

5 It creates a new social community: the metropolis.

6 And we do not know how to govern it.

7 Local affairs must be handled locally.

8 Otherwise, they will not get done.

9 If they do not get done locally they drift “upstairs” to central government.

10 This may be called the “law of political gravity”—and it is as inevitable as the physical law  
of gravity.

11 But local matters cannot be disposed of centrally, or they clog the wheels of central  
government to the point where they cannot turn at all, and where the major tasks of  
government—the formulation of national policy, national welfare, justice, defense or  
international policy—go by the board.

12 Centralized planning, as we have seen, soon degenerates into no plan at all. ¶¶¶

13 One reason why local affairs must be done locally is their mass of detail, of paper work, of  
regulations, of bureaucracy—especially as the burden of these things seems to increase  
with the square of the distance from the local scene where the need exists and where the  
action eventually has to be taken.

14 Another, more insidious reason is that any issue, if removed “upstairs,” acquires political  
connotations which might be quite lacking at the local scene.

15 The simplest technical matter, if referred to the top level, turns into a major philosophical  
issue and threatens thereby to become insoluble. ¶¶¶

16 We have known all this since the earliest days of organized government.

17 During the last twenty-five years, we have learned the lesson all over again, in the  
organization of the big business enterprise.

18 What we today call “decentralization” in business is nothing but the creation of local  
government within the business enterprise, so as to have the proper organ to handle and  
to decide operational problems at the scene of action.

19 The major purpose of decentralization is not to make local, operating management  
stronger—though that too is necessary.

20 It is to make possible effective top management.

21 Without decentralization top management simply cannot do its own job, but gets mired  
in a mass of details and torn to pieces in a welter of emotional and personal squabbles.  
¶¶¶

22 In preindustrial society, local government tasks are few and simple, and their  
performance tends to be governed by well-established custom.

23 In an industrial society, however, local government tasks rapidly multiply.

24 They become highly complex, requiring technical knowledge and professional  
competence in their planning and execution.

25 They also have greater impact; industrial society falls to pieces without a transportation

system, without adequate sewage or power, let alone without a functioning school system. ¶¶¶

- 26 Industrial society, therefore, more than any other society, needs strong and functioning institutions of local government.
- 27 Yet in every society that has undergone the process of industrialization, local government has fallen to pieces; and inevitably the tasks that local government defaulted on fell into the lap of central government. ¶¶¶
- 28 This often looked as if it were a deliberate reach for new powers on the part of central government.
- 29 This illusion has been strengthened by the traditional Leftist (or rather, French Revolution) distrust of local government and preference for central government, as the more uniform, more elegant and more "rational."
- 30 Of all the many follies of the Leftist tradition, none is greater than this preference for centralization.
- 31 Of all its many illusions, none has been blinder than the belief that the extension of central control over local affairs represents the success of a deliberate policy, rather than unintended failure, if not bankruptcy, of government altogether. ¶¶¶
- 32 To be sure, the central government in an industrial society has to be strong.
- 33 It has to do a great many things which earlier governments never dreamed of, or perhaps never heard of.
- 34 But precisely because it has to be strong, central government in an industrial society has to free itself from the jobs that require local knowledge, local decisions and local action—for the same reason that the top management of a big business, in order to be strong, frees itself from operating decisions through decentralization to local managers in charge of operating units.
- 35 No central government today has assumed more of the local government functions than that of France; indeed, local government in France hardly exists any more.
- 36 Yet no central government has been more obviously paralyzed, more impotent, than that of France.
- 37 To a large extent this results from the domination which local concerns, issues and prejudices exercise on all levels of the national government, and from the political and emotional heat which they generate.
- 38 «§§§»
- 39 One major reason for the crisis of local government in an industrial society is that the unit of settlement in an industrial society is not the village or even the city, but the metropolis.
- 40 The metropolis is not just a very large city.
- 41 It is quite different from the city. ¶¶¶
- 42 The metropolis cannot be confined within pre-established political or administrative boundaries.
- 43 It rapidly cuts across all such lines, whether those of city, county, province, state or even nation.
- 44 Its boundaries are not fixed but changing; above all they are different for different tasks—for schools or for water supply, for transportation, for sewage disposal or for power supply. ¶¶¶
- 45 Every industrial city has become such a metropolis, ever since the mushroom growth of

the industrial cities in the English Midlands produced the first crisis of local government a century or more ago.

- 46 Whether it is metropolitan New York, San Francisco, London, Moscow, Tokyo or Johannesburg, it outgrows whatever boundaries exist; and so do all the smaller metropolitan cities in any industrial society. ¶¶¶
- 47 Economic and social life in the industrial metropolis also has a degree of interdependence unknown in earlier, preindustrial times.
- 48 Of course, to provide common services – common defense, common law and justice, a common market, common coinage, common weights and measures, common churches or even a common good—has always been the rationale of the city.
- 49 But in his basic economic activities the stone mason of ancient Athens or eighteenth-century London was quite independent of the tanner or the weaver.
- 50 Today, however, all are dependent to an unheard-of degree both upon common services and facilities and upon each other. ¶¶¶
- 51 The metropolis must, therefore, organize activities and services across and beyond any traditional boundary line.
- 52 Even a “sovereign” state of the American Union may have ceased to be an effective unit for something so essentially local as highways. ¶¶¶
- 53 That the State of New Jersey is building an efficient system of superhighways only means that the traffic problems of the neighboring states, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware, are becoming that much worse; New Jersey’s new roads, with their superior traffic capacity, disgorge motorists and trucks into the already overloaded and inadequate road facilities of these states.
- 54 Engineers today talk of the “Eastern Sea Board Megapolis” stretching from Portland, Maine, to Norfolk, Virginia, and embracing fifty million people, as the “minimum” unit for highway and power supply planning.
- 55 But power supply must also take into account such strictly local matters as the effect of smoke from the powerhouses on public health, air traffic, or even on the market gardens which feed the inhabitants of the metropolitan area. ¶¶¶
- 56 There is today increasing concern with the social and cultural problems of metropolitan living.
- 57 We are conscious of the destruction of the countryside wrought by metropolitan expansion, and of the decay of the center of the old city as the metropolis pushes out its suburbs.
- 58 We are concerned with the sterility of life in the dead uniformity of ranch-style houses within easy commuting distance.
- 59 We wonder whether the increases in cancer, heart disease and mental illness reflect the tensions of metropolitan living.
- 60 We complain about the traffic problem, about inadequate community services, about high local taxes. ¶¶¶
- 61 The metropolis does indeed present basic problems of civilization.
- 62 It may well have all the traditional problems of the city and none of its advantages.
- 63 But the central problem is its government.
- 64 It can solve none of its problems, cannot even tackle them, unless it has effective political organs for community decision and action.

- 65 It is fashionable among social scientists today to play down the importance of government and to stress rather the role of society, habits, culture.
- 66 But all these are inert, chaotic and impotent without the formal and organized structure of government. ¶¶¶
- 67 The metropolis today has no government.
- 68 The traditional organs of local government are not adequate to the new tasks.
- 69 This is at the bottom of the problem of metropolitan civilization and culture.
- 70 But it is also a major factor in the crisis of national government.
- 71 Because there is no effective local government in the metropolis, local problems inevitably become central government concerns, which paralyze central government.