

Decentralization can finally bring power to the people

By JERRY CAMMARATA

One of the mantras of the 1960s, chanted over and over at virtually every rally and demonstration from Berkeley to Columbia, was "Power to the people!"

Surrounded by anti-Establishment rhetoric and antisocial behavior, however, the phrase acquired a dark meaning in those angry years. It was more a call to anarchy than to change, the "power" not to build but to destroy, not to contribute to society but to tear it down, not to share in the decision-making process but to bully and intimidate and force a minority point of view on the majority of Americans.

Yet the words are so compelling and, in their literal meaning, so appropriate, that it's time we salvaged them from the wreckage of that era and put them to use as a watchword for our own time. For there now seems to be a growing realization throughout America that government at all levels has grown out of touch with its own constituency, with those by whose permission it exists.

"Power to the people!" is a concept which would have delighted Thomas Jefferson. Among the Founding Fathers — many of whom feared giving too much control to average citizens — he was the one who most often warned of the dangers of centralized power.

"Governments," he wrote in the Declaration of Independence, "are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed," and that ongoing consent and participation of states in the government of the nation, of localities in the government of the states and of people in the government of both their states and nation, as well as of their own towns, cities and counties, has been one of the foundation stones of America's strength.

The word we hear employed most often these days to express the concept of government decentralization is "empowerment," a term borrowed from the so-

cial sciences, and it is a healthy direction for our society to take.

The principal difference between the idea of "empowerment" in 1994 and "people power" in 1968 is the realization nowadays that true popular power, constructive and positive power, also includes both obligations and responsibility on the part of those empowered. But the empowerment itself must be real. Paying mere lip service to it, as some politicians have done at all levels of government, can be no more than a cruel hoax, raising people's expectations only to have them later discover that no real power has changed hands.

In New York City, for example, the establishment of the community boards was an excellent concept, but its execution has varied with the changing faces in City Hall. The community boards were set up to bring the decision-making process on local issues down to where it belongs, to the people of the affected communities.

In some instances, when the boards were allowed to do their job, the results were gratifying. The people of those communities were truly empowered to make decisions regarding their own des-

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tinies. In other cases, however, through circumvention, technicalities or outright arrogance, the boards were ignored and their functions thwarted, leading to feelings of frustration and anger in the communities served.

To the delight of many New Yorkers, particularly here on Staten Island which has such a sad history of being short-changed by City government, our new mayor has made strong statements, and has already begun taking positive actions, in favor of empowerment. One of the first acts of Mayor Rudy Giuliani's administration was to seek input on how he can best return some of the powers which had been devoured by the city back to the borough presidents, and he should be roundly cheered for that. Who knows better the real needs and priorities of a borough like ours, a bureaucrat sitting in midtown Manhattan or an elected official whose entire constituency and focus resides in his or her own borough?

Mayor Giuliani has also extended the notion of empowerment to the operation of his own agencies. For instance, Police Commissioner William Bratton recently announced, using the very word "empow-

erment," that, as part of their organization of the Police Department, he would be delegating more of the critical decision-making authority to supervisors in the department.

In fact, in private industry empowerment is now considered one of the most effective techniques of improving performance and morale. When people feel that, instead of being prisoners of red tape and bureaucracy, they have the ability to take effective action themselves to accomplish necessary tasks, they feel better about their jobs and, looking at the bottom line, more gets done.

In the field of education, which happens to be my area of expertise, we have seen a number of promising developments which can have the net effect of taking many decisions away from those most remote from the students and parents being served by the educational system and placing those choices in the hands of people most likely to understand and be sensitive to the specific needs of their community.

The School Based Management System is a perfect example. Principals and supervisors at the individual school level, who know their students and communi-

ties better than anyone else, are being empowered to make the kinds of decisions which were formerly made a central headquarters. Not every school is the same as all the others and what works effectively in one may be totally wrong in another.

It is through programs such as this that our schools, instead of being viewed by those whom they serve as mere parts of a massive, monolithic structure, will now be seen as individual institutions, far better able to respond to the needs of students, parents and, ultimately, the taxpayers who support them.

Likewise, the legislation introduced in Albany by State Sen. John Marchi to replace the Central Board of Education with an individual school board in each of the boroughs, which Staten Island's central board member Michael Petrides has fought for so hard at the city level, has the potential to bring system-wide decisions down to the level of communities, in this case the five boroughs, which have very different attitudes, values and expectations with regard to education. A localized approach would avoid the kinds of crises our educational system has faced recently, such as those related to curriculum content, condom distribution and other such controversial matters, and allow the school's local community more input into positive programs for its own students.

The only caution, as I stated earlier, is that with empowerment comes responsibility and commitment. Freedom and self-determination are meaningless, and can even be destructive, if they aren't used wisely and in the best interests of society as a whole, as well as the interests of the smaller groupings of family and community. As with any kind of leadership, it takes strength, patience, dedication and reason to exercise power correctly, characteristics which will become more important than ever in this new age of empowerment.

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Staten Island Advance

Monday, April 22, 1996