

Vermont's Decentralists: Questioning Authority, Power and Wealth

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Centralization in our social, economic, and political systems has given rise to a deep sense of powerlessness among the people, a growing alienation throughout society, the depersonalization of vital services, excessive reliance on the techniques of management and control, and a loss of great traditions.

Forty years ago, a group bringing together the political left and right, Democrats and Republicans, attempted to create a “third way” called the Decentralist League of Vermont. It was convened by Robert O’Brien, a state senator who had recently lost the Democratic primary for governor, and John McClaughry, a Republican critical of his Party’s leadership. Each invited some allies for a series of meetings to forge a new political vision.

“We oppose political and economic systems which demand obedience to the dictates of elite groups, while ignoring abuses by those who operate the controls,” its founding statement announced.

Vermont had been fertile ground for “outside the box” thinking before. To start, it didn’t immediately join the new United States after the War of Independence, remaining an independent republic until 1791. Almost half a century later it was the first US state to elect an Anti-Mason governor, during a period when opposition to elites and secret societies was growing.



The [Anti-Mason movement](#) – which also elected a Pennsylvania governor and ran a candidate for president in 1832 – lasted only a decade. Most of its political leaders eventually joined either the short-lived Whig Party or the more durable Republicans. Along the way, however, it exposed the dangers of special interest groups and secret oaths and, on a practical level, initiated changes in the way political parties operated — notably nominating conventions and the adoption of party platforms, reforms soon embraced by other parties.

Early in its history, Vermont also had direct experience with another type of challenge to centralized power — nullification. The general idea is that since states created the federal government they also have the right to judge the constitutionality of federal laws — and potentially refuse to enforce them. It happened when American Colonists nullified laws imposed by the British. Since then states have occasionally used nullification to limit federal actions, from the Fugitive Slave Act to unpopular tariffs.

In November 1850 the Vermont legislature joined the club, approving a so-called Habeas Corpus Law that required officials to assist slaves who made it to the state. The controversial law rendered the Fugitive Slave Act effectively unenforceable, a clear case of nullification. Poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier praised Vermont's defiance, but President Millard Fillmore threatened to impose federal law through military action, if necessary. It never came to that.

Even a short-lived political movement can produce new thinking and unexpected change. In 1912, for example, the new Progressive Party inspired by Theodore Roosevelt when he lost the Republican nomination to William Howard Taft led to the election of Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt left the Party, but its work continued under Robert La Follette. Although La Follette's run for president in 1924 netted only 17 percent, he won Wisconsin, his home state, and successful reforms were implemented there.

In recent times, Vermont has emerged as a testing ground for political, economic and environmental thinking that challenges conventional wisdom. But the ex-urbanite professionals and members of the counterculture who arrived to help make that possible built on a solid foundation. Questioning of illegitimate, centralized power began before the American Revolution, as early settlers in the Green Mountains organized to declare themselves free of British rule and exploitation by land speculators. It continued with the jailhouse congressional [re-election of Matthew Lyon](#) in defiance of President Adams and the Alien and Sedition Acts, resistance to an embargo of Britain and the War of 1812, rejection of slavery and Masonic secrecy, and Town Meeting defeat of the [Green Mountain Parkway](#) during the New Deal. The pattern reflects a libertarian streak that has resisted the excesses of both liberal and conservative leadership.

One key reason is localism, a long cherished Vermont value. Even when Gov. Deane Davis, a conservative Republican, backed a state land use law in the late 1960s, he chose to call it "creative localism." Town Meeting exerts a powerful enduring influence, both practical and symbolic. A form and reminder of direct democracy, it holds out hope that self-government remains possible in the age of powerful administrative states. The stakes may be overstated at time, but the use of this forum – in some cases the only one available – can be a form of self-reliance and self-determination reminiscent of the early Jeffersonian impulse.



In a similar spirit, the group of Vermonters who launched an alliance in 1976 aimed at decentralizing political and economic power. Invited by Bob O'Brien, I acted as secretary and helped to craft its Statement of Principles.

That Fall, Bernie Sanders made his second run for Governor as a Liberty Union candidate and called for the break up of big banks. The winner was Republican businessman Richard Snelling, who defeated Employment Commissioner Stella Hackel after a fractious primary season. But Jimmy Carter became President and soon appointed Hackel as Director of the US Mint. According to a March 28, 1977 article by UPI, the Decentralist League was officially launched in Montpelier with a press conference and had 12 initial public signatories. The plan was not to become another political party, the press coverage said, but rather to “speak out for the interests of persons not protected by rigged deals.”

Charter members included McClaughry of Kirby; Sen. O'Brien of Orange County; Sen. Melvin Mandigo, a Republican representing Essex-Orleans; Rep. William Hunter, a Democrat from Weathersfield; John Welch of Rutland, who sought the 1976 GOP nomination for U.S. Senate; and Frank Bryan, a UVM professor. I also made the eclectic list, identified as a magazine editor and activist from Burlington, joining former Democratic party vice-chairman Margaret Lucenti from Barre; James Perkins of Sheffield, co-chair of the Vermont Caucus for the Family; William Staats of Newfane, founder of the Green Mountain Boys; Martin Harris of Sudbury, leader of the National Farmers Organization; and John Schnebley Jr. of Townshend, who ran in the 1976 Democratic primary for the U.S. House.

As I outlined in *Decentralism & Liberation in the Workplace*, a July 1976 essay published in response to the US Bicentennial celebrations, Decentralism involves participatory democracy and worker ownership, home rule and neighborhood assemblies, regional self-sufficiency in food and energy, and voluntary inter-community alliances. Through efforts at both the industrial and local political levels, it can move us toward a social libertarian culture that respects the traditions of freedom and independence in America's past, and that adds to this heritage a more positive vision of human nature, ethical and ecological tools, and an internationalist perspective.

The basic purpose of the League, McClaughry argued at the time, was to “re-orient the political spectrum so that people begin to see issues in terms of power widely dispersed —

close to them in communities, and power centralized — in large institutions over which they have no control.”

Bryan and McClaughry continued to explore the concept and Vermonters’ attraction to decentralism in *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale*. “God-given liberties, hostility to the central power, whatever it may be,” they wrote in 1990, “their attachment to their towns and schools and local communities, their dedication to common enterprise for the common good – all these have been among the most cherished Vermont traits, the subject of countless eulogies of Vermont tradition over the years.”

Although the League lasted only a few years — a casualty of Reagan era polarization — it did identify a set of core beliefs, priorities and policies that could unite those who find the current national and global order unsustainable and dangerous. In Burlington, one legacy was the creation of Neighborhood Planning Assemblies. Taking aim at centralized power and wealth, the League asserted that decentralizing both, where and whenever possible, is the best way to preserve diversity, increase self-sufficiency, and satisfy human needs. Its principles, released in March 1977, may resonate anew in the current global atmosphere of resurgent authoritarianism.

Decentralist League of Vermont Statement of Principles

In a free and just society all men and women will have the fullest opportunity to enjoy liberty, achieve self-reliance, and participate effectively in the political and economic decisions affecting their lives. Wealth and power will be widely distributed. Basic human rights will be protected. The principle of equal rights for all, special privileges for none, will prevail.

When economic and political power is centralized in the hands of a few, self-government is replaced by rigid and remote bureaucracies, the independence of each citizen is threatened, and the processes of freedom and justice are subverted. Centralized power is the enemy of individual liberty, self-reliance, and voluntary cooperation. It tends to corrupt those who wield it and to debase its victims.

The trend toward centralization in our social, economic, and political systems has given rise to a deep sense of powerlessness among the people, a growing alienation throughout society, the depersonalization of vital services, excessive reliance on the techniques of management and control, and a loss of great traditions.

Decentralists share with “conservatives” repugnance for unwarranted governmental interference in private life and community affairs. We share with “liberals” an aversion to the exploitation of human beings. We deplore, however, conventional “liberal” and “conservative” policies which have concentrated power, ignored the importance of the human scale, and removed decision making from those most directly affected.

Decentralists thus favor a reversal of the trend toward all forms of centralized power, privileged status, and arbitrary barriers to individual growth and community self-determination. We oppose political and economic systems which demand obedience to the dictates of elite groups, while ignoring abuses by those who operate the controls. We believe that only by decentralization will we preserve that diversity in society which provides the best guarantee that among the available choices, each individual will find

those conditions which satisfy his or her human needs.

Decentralists believe in the progressive dismantling of bureaucratic structures which stifle creativity and spontaneity, and of economic and political institutions which diminish individual and community power.

We support a strengthening of family, neighborhood and community life, and favor new forms of association to meet social and economic needs.

We propose and support:

- Removal of governmental barriers which discourage initiative and cooperative self-help
- Growth of local citizen alliances which strengthen self-government and broaden participation in economic and political decisions
- Widespread ownership of productive industry by Vermonters and employees
- Protection of the right to acquire, possess and enjoy private property, where the owner is personally responsible for its use and when this use does not invade the equal rights of others
- Rebuilding a viable and diverse agricultural base for the Vermont economy, with emphasis on homesteading
- A decent level of income for all, through their productive effort whenever possible, or through compassionate help which enhances their dignity and self-respect
- Reshaping of education to promote self-reliance, creativity, and a unity of learning and work
- A revival of craftsmanship in surroundings where workers can obtain personal satisfaction from their efforts
- The use of technologies appropriate to local enterprise, and which increase our energy self-sufficiency
- Mediation of disputes rather than reliance on regulations and adversary proceedings

This decentralist program implies a de-emphasis of status, luxury, and pretense, and a new emphasis on justice, virtue, equality, spiritual values, and peace of mind.

Decentralism will mean a rebirth of diversity and mutual aid, a new era of voluntary action, a full appreciation of our heritage, an affirmation of meaningful liberty, and a critical awareness of Vermont's relationship to the rest of the nation and to the world.

Greg Guma is the Vermont-based author of Dons of Time, Uneasy Empire, Spirits of Desire, Big Lies, and The People's Republic: Vermont and the Sanders Revolution. He helped to write the Decentralist League's Statement of Principles and led a successful campaign for neighborhood assemblies in Burlington.

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