The Dark Side of Good Government
Los Angeles is in the midst of a half-finished revolution.
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The bland, Progressive-Era mask that has been the face of city government in Los Angeles since the 1920s is cracking, but not fast enough to reveal the comprehending human face that Angelenos seek. Unless the city falls to a revolution of popularity--unless Angelenos soon see more of their complexions and conditions when they look at the apparatus of city government--the only loyalty to Los Angeles left may be nostalgia. Perhaps not at the ballot box, where breaking up Los Angeles can be defeated, but in the hearts of the city, where it actually matters--the idea of secession will have won.

It's a hopeful sign that recent opinion polling shows that enough hearts in the city are still undecided. I imagine among those most torn by conflicting allegiances to what Los Angeles is and what it might be is Mayor James K. Hahn. He has appointed an activist general manager to administer the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, and Greg Nelson's passion for his new job could restart the popularization of civic life that has drifted since City Charter amendments were approved in 1999. But the mayor also has made too many safe appointments to a welter of policy-setting boards and commissions--nearly 60 of them in the city's unaccountable administrative structure. His choices perpetuate the hegemony over L.A.'s future of the lucky Angelenos who are both good and well-connected. The members of those boards and commissions were once the city's rebels. Eighty years ago, municipal government in Los Angeles was so rank with corruption that good citizens rose up against it. Some were shot at. One reformer was nearly blown to bits by a bomb planted by an L.A. police captain. The good citizens resisted, and with skills honed in the popular movements of the Progressive Era--slum clearance, women's suffrage and the temperance crusade--a generation of reformers legislated enough purity into City Hall by 1945 that Los Angeles had "good government."

Goodness, however, came at the expense of popularity. The civic apparatus the reformers adopted was based on a deep mistrust of elected officials and infinite confidence in people who were just like the reformers. The appointed boards and commissions that replaced corruptible politicians built the facilities and delivered the services that supported the city's widening suburban
fringe. More cheaply and efficiently than any other big city, Los Angeles supplied its residents with water, electricity, streets, parks, police protection, libraries and trash collection, but with the dispassion of a utility. That was the model intended by the city's "revolution of reform" in 1925--city government as a well-run public utility--and its success inevitably turned citizens, otherwise burdened with the messy relationships required of real citizenship, into mere consumers of municipal services.

It's the system that Hahn's 20 years at City Hall as controller and city attorney trained him to serve, which explains why he so often projects the image of a dutiful corporate president fronting for an anonymous board of directors. After all, the good and well-connected people he's appointed to five-year terms on the city's boards and commissions are just public-spirited

volunteers, only part-time executives of city departments (except for public works commissioners) and all un-elected. The system is supposed to shield its citizen managers behind the political screen of the mayor's office.

The system of anonymity is still working. Drill down through the city's intranet pages, as I did last week, and you'll eventually find links to some, but not all, of the city's boards and commissions, and drilling deeper, you'll find that some, but not many, of the rosters of board members and commissioners come with biographies and photographs that actually give features to the smooth, unyielding surface of city government. It shows a face not many working-class Angelenos will recognize as theirs.

It really doesn't make much difference if the appointments are among the 114 Hahn has made so far or the nearly 200 who remain as former Mayor Richard Riordan holdovers. In both administrations, city departments are managed and city policies are made by middle-class residents
(somewhat more than half of whom are male) who mostly live in the Santa Monica Mountains, the Westside and the well-off communities of northwest San Fernando Valley. Race, always mistaken as the only defining boundary in Los Angeles, hardly counts. The best predictor of who sits on a city board or commission isn't color; it's (in ascending order) a job in a public-interest "strategic communications" firm, a law degree, or a history of past service on some other board or commission.

It's not that Hahn has appointed supporters (and past and future campaign contributors) or members of his political party--all mayors have done that. What makes the fabric of civic life in Los Angeles look so threadbare is that these well-connected people connect more to the apparatus they serve than to the life of their city. The management of everyday government in Los Angeles--on the level of parking tickets, building permits and library books--is brought to you by earnest and well-intentioned volunteers who turn out to be lobbyists, lawyers and members of the city's semi-pro commissariat.

They're good at their jobs, as just about everyone at City Hall is, but still the city threatens to tear itself to shreds.

Los Angeles is in the midst of a half-finished revolution of popularity. The city now has cleaner lines of authority for city department heads and a clearer separation of powers between the City Council and a stronger mayor's office. But Los Angeles doesn't have a bigger council, an expansion of popular government left out of the charter reforms. Because the structure of city government still resists being human-scaled, porous and neighborhood-specific, the disconnection between city streets and City Hall persists.

I once thought that the network of neighborhood councils promised in the 1999 charter amendments would eventually balance the weight of all those well-connected people with a corps of well-informed citizen stakeholders connected to actual neighborhoods and standing up for a lively cacophony of competing, small-scale interests. I thought that civic life might be reclaimed in Los Angeles street by street. I'm not so sure now. Nelson and the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment have 184 neighborhood councils to shepherd through the application and

confirmation process, and only a handful have been confirmed by the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners.

Border disputes have broken out as new councils jostle for turf in Glassell Park, the arts district and in South-Central. Some council organizers look suspiciously like developers, particularly in Chinatown, and others look like fronts for NIMBYist homeowner associations or spokesmen with narrow agendas. Some organizers are simply losing heart with the difficulties of giving government in Los Angeles a human face. Just defining a neighborhood has proven harder than it seemed, as residents find that no one at City Hall knows where one neighborhood begins and another ends in fluid L.A. There's not enough staff for the empowerment department, not enough training for aspirant neighborhood councilors, not enough experience all around, and almost no time left for the new councils to learn where their power lies and how to use it.

Hahn knows that time is running out, prodded by his sister Janice--a member of the City Council and an early advocate of neighborhood councils. More important, the man he appointed to head the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment knows it, but Nelson has the optimism of a true revolutionary. Even though organized neighborhood advocacy unsettles the tight relationships between council members and City Hall lobbyists, he expects the City Council as a whole to welcome vocal and effective neighborhood councilors. Even though no formal procedure exists for neighborhood councilors to advise Hahn on city budget priorities, Nelson expects one soon (but probably not soon enough to affect the next city budget). Even though no one knows if the well-connected volunteers who sit on city boards and commissions can relate to the feisty new volunteers who represent neighborhoods, Nelson still expects the mongrel system to work.

It must. The city's indifferent civic apparatus, designed to work behind a mask of obscurity, needs a revolution of popular desire as thorough as the one that cleaned up a rotten city 80 years ago. Unless popular government overthrows merely good government in Los Angeles, the succeeding revolution will leave a permanently fractured metropolis.

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