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Book Review, Progressive Cities and the Tenants Movement

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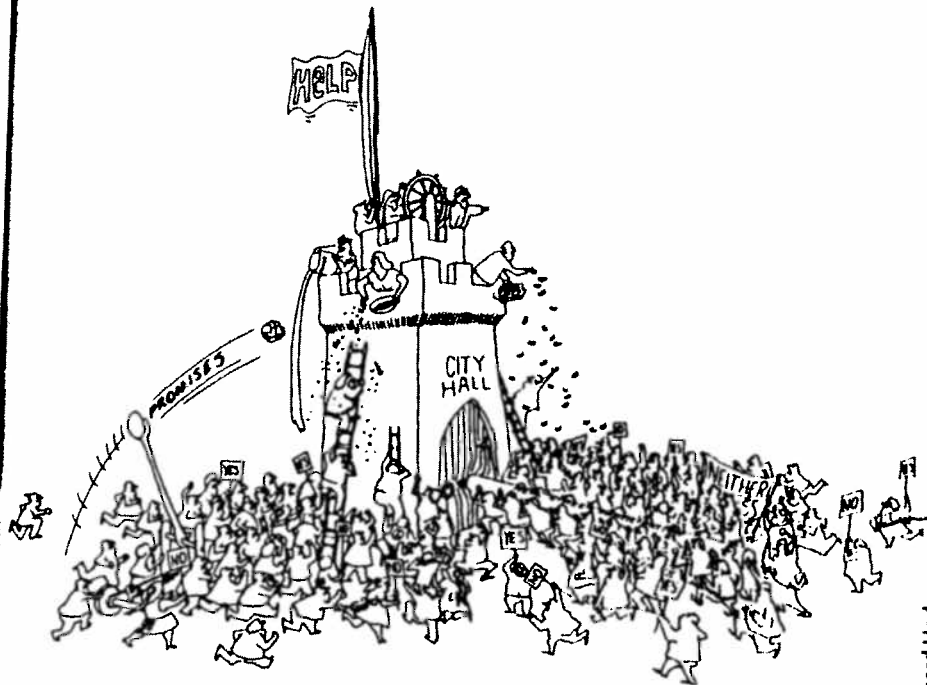
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Book Review



Richard Hedman

Progressive Cities and the Tenants Movement

BY DENNIS KEATING

In several articles and books in the early 1980s, progressive tenant activists and academicians, including John Atlas, Peter Dreier, Chester Hartman, and John Mollenkopf, have argued that if tenant groups are to have a more effective influence, they must help to form progressive political coalitions at the local level. They have suggested that tenants can ally with community housing and neighborhood groups, labor, consumer and environmentalist organizations, and minority groups, including women's organizations, to win reforms and gain control of city government. This is much easier suggested than done. Since the decline and fall of municipal socialism around World War I, there have been few examples of progressive local regimes. Yet, many observers see little hope of building a progressive nation-

al political coalition (e.g. the Rainbow Coalition in the Democratic Party or the Progressive Party) without a strong and widespread local political base of power.

In *The Progressive City* planner Pierre Clavel chronicles how progressive coalitions and politicians did achieve power in five cities — Berkeley, Burlington, Cleveland, Hartford, and Santa Monica. The book emphasizes the role of planners in these cities but does discuss the importance of housing issues in Berkeley and Santa Monica. In these two cities issues like renters' rights, displacement, and rent control rose to the fore as important electoral issues leading to successful initiatives creating elected rent control boards. Clavel discusses the role of Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights (SMRR) in first passing rent, condo conversion and demolition controls and then in electing slates of candidates who controlled the Rent Board

and later the Santa Monica City Council. Unfortunately, Clavel does not discuss the housing campaigns in any detail, including the organizing of tenants. Likewise, his treatment of the eventual triumph of Berkeley Citizens' Action (BCA) mentions the persistent importance of housing issues, especially rent control, in Berkeley's volatile politics. However, again Clavel does not discuss in detail the politics of rent control and tenant organizing in Berkeley, including the often bitter disputes between BCA and the Berkeley Tenants Union (BTU).

Nevertheless, this book is recommended reading to those interested in how to form multi-issue progressive electoral coalitions at the municipal level. This process has occurred in other cities and tenant and housing groups can point to important gains in cities like Boston, Chicago, Jersey City and San Francisco and in college towns like Ann Arbor and Cambridge.

Since the completion of Clavel's case studies, Burlington Mayor Sanders lost his independent attempt to become Governor of Vermont, BCA won a smashing victory in the 1984 Berkeley election but then barely retained control of the City Council in 1986, and Santa Monica's progressives failed to regain their previous majority in the 1986 election. (For an update on the Burlington story, see "A Tenant Movement Grows in Vermont," *Shelterforce*, November/December 1986.) However, progressive tenant slates remain in control of the elected Rent Control boards in both cities. As Clavel notes, what is hopeful is that, while progressives have suffered setbacks and defeats in these five cities, they did achieve power, develop a constituency, and have developed a political legitimacy that has been long absent in American municipal politics. Whether this can be translated into a more prominent and influential national presence for progressive politics and the housing and tenants movement remains to be seen. ■

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