

Stopping attacks on freedom aids genuine sustainability

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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Not long ago I read two novels by Ken Follett, *The Pillars of the Earth* and *World Without End*. Both were about cathedral builders and were set around 1100 AD and 1300 AD respectively.

Of course, I found it fascinating to read these “faction” books that went into great detail about how the great old cathedrals in England were built.

But the books were not just about cathedrals. Follett gives a great insight into what life was like for commoners and nobility in those days, and while his description of life in that time gives you a greater appreciation for the freedoms we have in America today, it also resembles much of the behavior we see among those of us who don't appreciate freedom so much.

Observing the lives of commoners and of nobility is not all that unlike watching the lives of the average citizen and certain people in government. In medieval England, commoners were people who had little opportunity to make a good life for themselves, and if they did, nobility could steal or destroy their wealth or even kill them with impunity, simply to protect their own interests. The law, what little there was of it in those days, was always on the side of nobility, and as such, commoners had little incentive to make anything of themselves.

Despite that, at least in the story line of the books, communities of commoners worked together to make their communities better and more prosperous places. And that is as it should be.

Now that might come as a surprise to some of my critics who believe that I am against urban planning. The fact is that I do believe in planning, and I have done master plans for many churches to confirm that.

But planning a church and planning a city are two entirely different things. Building true consensus within a church is far more likely than building consensus within a community. People in a church think more alike and have confidence in leadership. In contrast, within a community there is great disagreement among citizens, and real consensus is not achievable, at least not regarding the built environment.

So I can sympathize to a certain degree with city planners who earnestly want to make their communities better. They want their cities to be beautiful and vibrant so as to attract the money, talent, and young blood that they need. But what they are often stuck with are deteriorating streets, neighborhoods, and commercial and industrial districts, and a town full of people who either don't have the funding to make improvements or don't have the confidence in the economy or government to create a safe haven to invest in those improvements.

The problem is that many, or perhaps even most, cities are trying to solve the deterioration problem without addressing the real problems. In many respects, it has become a situation where the public has become the commoners and the government has become the nobility. This is especially evident in cases where cities practice eminent domain under the interpretation of the Kelo vs. New London case instead of the way the framers of the Constitution intended it to be. That practice demonstrates a tremendous disrespect toward property rights, and it does not go unnoticed.

That aside, I find it perplexing that there is more focus on creating public infrastructure in city planning than there is in creating prosperity and a good quality of community life. After all, public infrastructure should be a by-product of the prosperity of the community, not its cause. It is little wonder that city plans all over the country are being written and rewritten, justified by the notion that all previous plans were obsolete or lacked "vision" in the first place.

What is being overlooked in city planning is the tremendous power of freedom. When citizens have freedom it means that they can keep what they earn, they can invest in real property without fear of it being taken from them, they can make bigger plans and take more promising risks if they know they are in a place where they and their property are safe.

If we want true sustainability, we need to stop attacking freedom, we need to improve the morality and morale of the populace, and we need to create confidence in the public that the government is there to serve them, not oppress them. If we don't, we will continue to evolve into a society more like the commoners and nobility of medieval days, where no one had hope for a good life. If we were to recognize how many projects are not being built because of fear of government, it would make us realize that the few projects that are being built are insignificant in comparison.

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