

Thomas Bray / The Detroit News

Even before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, it was growing difficult to find any one -- beyond a few die-hards in academia -- who would admit to being a socialist. But the socialist style of thinking hadn't vanished. It had merely undergone a name change. It has re-emerged in the form of environmental radicalism.

One small but telling example from my back yard: the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council.

As in many states, Michigan do-gooders have worked themselves into a stew on the issue of sprawl. The first executive order of Michigan's new Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm, whose campaign was lavishly supported by Greens, created a 26-member council to make suggestions for protecting the state's supposedly vanishing open spaces. Never mind that only about 12 percent of Michigan land is defined by federal studies as urban or suburban (or that government owns 20 percent of the state's landmass).

Former Gov. William Milliken, a Republican, was appointed to co-chair the council, along with former state Attorney General Frank Kelley, a Democrat. But this hardly amounts to bipartisanship: Milliken is a liberal Republican who has spent much of the last decade or two criticizing his own party's leaders, particularly on environmental issues. And the council's staff is headed by former Milliken aide Bill Rustem, an outspoken advocate of smart growth -- the clever name (anybody here in favor of dumb growth?) appropriated by Greens to mask their no-growth agenda.

At the first meeting of the council in late March, moreover, Milliken announced that decision would be made by "consensus" and that no minority report would be allowed. At the second meeting council members were greeted with a staff-generated document outlining "Vision and Goals," as well as a set of "Guiding Principles."

Much of the language betrays the command-and-control vision at the heart of the smart growth movement. For example, the draft calls for "sustainable communities, a sustainable quality of life, sustainable economic growth, sustainable development" and so on. No doubt it will be left to the commissars to tell us what is sustainable and what is not. The term "fair" also makes frequent appearances, as in requiring that "Land use decisions are made in a way that ensures fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and incomes."

You might think such a council would be a good place to discuss practical issues such as traffic congestion. But the state's new transportation chief, Gloria Jeffs, used her turn at the microphone to demand that the focus be on "environmental justice."

There is, to be sure, the usual nod to property rights and home rule. But one proposed principle up for consideration would require "One coordinated set of statewide land use rules." So much for local control.

And throughout, the drafters assert that the first object of land use policy should be to protect "bio-diversity" and a "healthy environment." That sounds great. But such vague concepts are being used by Greens to trump the age-old property rights at the heart of Anglo-Saxon liberty and prosperity. Karl Marx would have loved it.

The problem for older cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia and New York is not a surfeit of property rights. It's too little. Urban renewal, the smart growth plan of its day, destroyed whole communities in the 1950s and '60s. Liberal Republicans like Milliken made the situation worse in the 1970s by inventing revenue-sharing programs that rewarded cities according to their "tax effort." Now he and others wonder why the Detroit metropolitan area is balkanized into scores of little communities where citizens can keep a closer eye on things.

If the do-gooders in Michigan and similar states are serious about ending sprawl, they should focus on cutting taxes and forcing cities to deliver good services, decent schools and safe streets. But if the planners insist on a process driven by a vision of statewide planning -- itself based on the faulty old socialist idea that markets are incapable of delivering what people truly want -- no progress is likely