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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

WHEN Tip O'Neill said, "All politics is local," he was talking about the way political issues are shaped by local interests. Defense policy, for example, logically calls for an overview of national-security needs, yet it is often dictated by employment levels in factories that happen to depend on defense contracts and are in the district of an influential congressman. In such cases, local interest debases the issue with a shortsighted and self-serving perspective. But there's another kind of local politics, and it works in a way that's almost completely opposite. For instance, the City Council of Irvine, California, recently passed legislation restricting the use of chlorofluorocarbons within the city limits. This legislation will cause hardships for local businesses and raise the cost of some consumer goods for local people, and these sacrifices will not be rewarded by any special environmental benefits to the citizens of Irvine. Everyone in the world, and for generations to come, will benefit, but only by an infinitesimal amount, and the citizens of Irvine no more than anyone else. From a realist's point of view, Irvine's action seems almost unnatural; it's idealistic, even quixotic, for little Irvine to take responsibility for the sky. And yet on an emotional level the action seems exactly right.

As global problems become overwhelming, the idea of locality assumes

a new political importance. The issue of nuclear armaments, for example, presents two conflicting perspectives. From the international, panoramic perspective of the government in Washington, a nuclear defense seems reasonable, but from the perspective of, say, someone sitting under a tree in his back yard the idea of a nuclear defense appears insane. People sitting in their back yards have no power—none, anyway, that might have a meaningful impact on the nuclear situation. Nor, usually, do they have much knowledge about defense strategy. And yet home is the place where the deepest response to the nuclear situation takes place. If one imagined a political order based solely on personal responses to the nuclear situation, the natural unit of that order would be very small—somewhere between a county and a parish, or maybe even smaller. Similarly, global environmental problems are both intimate and transcendent.

Ever since global issues have overtaken our world, the price of political awareness has been a feeling of helplessness. The technical aspects of these problems and the formidable expertise that is brought to bear on them generate confusion in us all, but even children can sense through that confusion the inability of our trustees to effectively take responsibility. Governments become enveloped by an aura of pretense. Leaders seem to fear that if they admit that a situation is lethal and out of control they will lose their authority, and

yet in not admitting it they lose authority anyway.

It may be that authority—the power to take responsibility—can at this point be recovered only on a local level, and that this is why local politics has acquired new significance. In any case, the action in Irvine—or in Suffolk County, New York, or in Vermont, where related actions have been taken—does not have about it the quality of confusion that afflicts so many government actions on global concerns. Irvine's step does not come anywhere near solving the problem of ozone depletion, but the Irvine City Council did not claim that it would: so large is the sky and so small is Irvine that the relationship of the city to the problem is automatically acknowledged as that of tiny beings to something utterly beyond their control. In this acknowledgment, true scale is recovered, and, with it, effectiveness. The problems of the environment are beyond the power of Irvine to solve, but because the city took responsibility where it could, it is no longer helpless. It examined its own contribution to the destruction of the ozone, asked, "If not us, who?" and heard the answer "No one."

Show of Shows

WHEN we heard that a "Saturday Night Live" special, on the occasion of the show's fifteenth anniversary, would be broadcast by NBC

