Sister Cities

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Standing in Westminster College, where 75 years ago Winston Churchill gave his Iron Curtain Speech, Senator Bernie Sanders of the United States shared his conception of world affairs. The audience that Churchill addressed was facing a very different set of concerns, but Sanders made some remarks that resonated with the past: "In my view the United States must seek partnerships not just between governments, but between peoples... a sensible and effective foreign policy recognizes that our safety and welfare is bound up with the safety and welfare of others around the world".

Since entering politics, Sanders' approach to international affairs reflects his resistance to the romanticized image of American policy established and brought to life by the country's elite, on both the domestic and national stages. He has insisted that unity within and beyond borders can be attained despite cultural differences, and divergent national interests.

From the early days of his political career, as mayor of Vermont, Sanders has challenged the rigid approach of Washington bureaucrats. In a Cold War era of heightened tensions, he gave a city with 45,000 individuals its own foreign policy and agenda, in the hope that his city could become a beacon for the rest of the nation. His message, to build bridges rather than walls, created national news, particularly when he established sister cities with Puerto Cabeza, Venezuela and Yaroslavl, Russia. They became conduits through which communication could pass, and they created a sense of shared humanity beyond the covers of war and conflict. This kinship helped citizens of very different states to recognize shared ideals of empathy and connection. This effort had the effect of empowering ordinary citizens.

Understanding a sense of shared and common humanity as citizens has seldom been more critical than during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This virus has shown no discrimination to the color of skin, the language we speak, or the strength of democracy we live in. As such, the Covid is also a symbol of a much larger geo-political and cultural shift that we have witnessed within the last century. According to Varieties of Democracies, 68% of the world's population is currently living under an autocratic regime, and 2020 marked the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The doctrine of American Exceptionalism has failed, and as world politics has changed, so too must our approach. The ever-worsening climate crisis and its many effects, including forced displacement (272 million immigrants in 2020 alone), the 21st century requires newfound unity and communication between citizens and nations.

The establishment of the sister cities for Burlington came at a critical moment. By offering a new approach to Cold War politics to Burlington, Sanders managed to make the intangible ideal of international collaboration more tangible. His signature on the sister city treaty expanded the scope of discussion by ushering in unrepresented voices to address needs and opinions of citizens in very different settings. This effort acknowledged the daily lives of peoples and communities that were hidden behind the façade of the nation. Although the concept of the sister city was not novel during Sanders time as mayor, the critical timing and the deliberate connections established sent a strong message to the world. The small city of Burlington VT became a microcosm for progress and reform, and a model for the rest of the nation.

Although sister city relationships are informal, their symbolic presence can be powerful vehicles for messaging to both the state sand citizens. In the past decade, sister cities have flourished, and there are currently a total of 1,800 sister cities partnered in 138 countries. The informal nature of the twin city relationship gives rise to challenges, of course, particularly in terms

of their sustainability. When a sister city treaty is signed, there is no common agenda beyond the idea that both cities will support each other in attempts to hear the voices of everyday citizens. As such, the impact of the relationship depends largely on the initiatives of the citizens involved. Sister city relationships can adapt and change with the introduction of new challenges, innovations, and initiatives. For example, Chicago and Mexico City have become powerful hubs for innovation and economic growth, and as sister cities, they have reaped some of the benefits of their respective advances. Metro Chicago hosts the second largest concentration of Mexican immigrants, and its relationship with Mexico City acknowledges the inextricable connection and association of the two cities. Formalizing this relationship has incentivized collaboration between citizens, which has helped produce more than 1.7 billion in trade for locally produced products.

Collaborations like this one are powerful because they are built on a pre-existing foundation of citizen interest and connection, thereby building on the power and strength of the immigrant. Traditional diplomacy stems from the decisions and perspective of decision makers, and this often means defying the wishes and voices of the public. The sister city collaboration creates a space for citizens to promote their own interests, rather than those of the elites, and as such they are in line with Sanders overall objectives as a politician.

Sander's initiation of the sister city relationship between and Yaroslavl, Puerto Cabeza and Burlington during times of heightened national conflict illustrated foresight to a world beyond conflict and war. His intentional partnerships highlighted how war and conflict are temporary, but human capital and connection are sustainable. The sister city relationships between Burlington and its twins have waned and flourished over the years, but they have stood the test of time. Most recently, millions of dollars in aid were sent to Puerto Cabeza from Burlington in the wake of a destructive hurricane. This is but one example of how powerful a relationship forged during political conflict can be, as it surpasses the confines of state politics to help serve and support the needs of the people.