

PERSPECTIVE



The civic DNA of (your town’s name)

The last time Connecticut towns elected their municipal leaders we were four months away from a pandemic that no one saw coming.

As the newly elected were still learning the ropes and the re-elected resuming the familiar rites of the budget cycle, towns halls shut down tight. Like schools and businesses, local government urgently had to find ways to operate, with the added responsibility of doing the public business in new, emergency definitions of “open.”

It’s municipal election time in Connecticut again, and I suspect most taxpayers and residents have given it even less thought than usual. Local elections perennially get the least voter participation of any election cycle. Add to that the fact that town business went out of sight for months in 2020, unless a citizen was committed enough to attend a public meeting by teleconference — once the town got that up and running.

Yet during the grim and isolating pandemic months the trash was still collected, the town’s bills paid, records kept, and you might even have gotten a building permit if you gave an official working from home enough lead time. Most important, a presidential election was successfully held, to the everlasting credit of town clerks and registrars everywhere.

What brings all this to mind is that in Year 2 of Covid, the July-to-June Fiscal Year 2022, the pandemic is playing a new role in local government affairs. This is the banner year of Covid relief funds. Watching the response of local towns to the news that they will receive cash infusions in the millions of dollars is a reminder of why we in Connecticut stubbornly stick with the concept of Home Rule, though operating separate services is far less efficient and economical than regionalized agencies would be.

Efficiency and thrift are the cardinal virtues of Yankee governance because taxation and public spending dominate every other consideration. Rather than economize by joining our public school systems or police departments, we observe our even higher principle of self-determination. The people of (your town’s name) know what’s good for (your town’s name).

Watching the response of towns to the pledge of federal assistance, I believe it. In ordinary times, lean times, public officials have to be miserly with the dollars, which often tempts them to be equally stingy with transparency and participation in decisionmaking. They sometimes forget the legal description of an open, public meeting. In some towns there is chronic mistrust between the school board and the finance board.

The power to choose, when there is finally enough money to make things happen, seems to have activated the sense of a civic DNA. Virtually every town in southeastern Connecticut is asking residents and taxpayers how to use the relief funds for a better future for the people who will live there. Any town that might have delayed on getting public input has heard about it. Under the New England model of small town governance, people know what fits for (your town’s name).

It will be vital to think forward, not back, and equitably, rather than for any one privileged group. If towns choose to spend American Rescue Plan funds on projects such as broadband access for all neighborhoods or energy-efficient climate control for schools and public buildings, for example, economy and efficiency will be automatic and equity will follow.

Home rule for 169 Connecticut towns costs too much in dollars, but it does pay off in local leadership. An appropriate way to show appreciation to local leaders for coming through in unimagined circumstances would be to adopt their attitude, which I’d describe this way: Of course we keep the town running.

Of course, with wise use of relief funds we can do even better for (your town’s name). And of course, the rest of us will get out and vote Nov. 2.

Lisa McGinley is a member of The Day Editorial Board.



Given the quantum leap in technology called for in AUKUS, Electric Boat’s expertise in design and construction will be indispensable.

Deep dive

By U.S. REP. JOE COURTNEY

ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2021, President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Bruce Morrison and U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a new defense pact among the three countries to bolster our existing alliance in the Indo-Pacific region. The histories of our three nations are intertwined, and so are our destinies — for Australia, the U.K., the United States, and for our allies, the AUKUS alliance represents a firm and deliberate move to strengthen international rule of law, and maintain the post-World War II international order that has led to unprecedented peace and prosperity worldwide.

Although some seemed caught off guard by the development, all three countries have longstanding ties and a joint presence in that part of the world dating back even before World War II. For example, after Pearl Harbor in 1942, when Japanese forces were able to advance in the South Pacific with little resistance, the northwestern Australian city of Darwin was devastated by waves of Japanese bombers. To this day, the Battle of Darwin is seared into the memory of Australia — a reminder of its vulnerability to external threats. Later that year, the U.S. Navy blunted Japan’s designs on Australia in the Battle of the Coral Sea, inflicting heavy losses on Japan’s fleet, enough to deter any further attacks on that continent for rest of the war.

The gratitude of Australia to the American people for that single-handed save still resonates to this day. In the wake of the war, Australia, New Zealand and the United States entered into a security agreement known as ANZUS, which just celebrated its 75th anniversary of maintaining close ties amongst our navies and air forces. ANZUS isn’t just a paper commitment. Starting in 2011, 2,500 U.S. Marines have been deployed to Darwin on a steady basis, joining the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force to reassert freedom of navigation and overflight. The three ANZUS countries, along with Canada and the United Kingdom, also continue to operate the “Five Eyes” — an intelligence sharing alliance that goes back to the “code breakers” WWII collaboration in 1941.

Sharing technology

At the center of the AUKUS deal, as has been well reported, is the momentous decision to share nuclear technology for naval propulsion, which the United States has done only once before — namely, with the United Kingdom in 1958. Although the state of Connecticut is as far away from the Indo-Pacific region as any place in the world, our state will be involved in this new undertaking. Just as it was in 1958.

At the time, the U.S. was the only country in the world that had mastered the complexity of nuclear propulsion. Since the passage of the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 (known as the McMahon Act after its sponsor, Senator Brien McMahon of Connecticut), the U.S. Navy had been barred from sharing that technology with any other nation — even with an ally such as Great Britain, which participated in the Manhattan Project during World War II. In the 1950s, both Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Dwight Eisenhower bristled at this restriction, and lobbied the Senate to allow one exception, for the U.K. The Senate finally relented in 1958, and adopted an amendment to the McMahon Act that recognized the “special relationship” between America and Great Britain, and allowed

for that specific instance of nuclear technology sharing.

Soon thereafter, the admiral in charge of the Nuclear Navy, Hyman Rickover, guided this joint process that continues to this day. For example, right now in 2021, the U.S. Navy and Electric Boat, along with the U.K. Navy and BAE systems, are building a “common missile tube” for their submarine recapitalization programs.

Rickover’s successor, Admiral James Caldwell, has now been tasked in the wake of AUKUS to analyze the ways that our three countries can execute Australia’s new submarine construction. It’s a daunting task, and it’s way too early to predict how the work will be allocated among the three countries. But given the pre-existing relationship that Connecticut has with Australia, which I have personally witnessed as co-chair of the bipartisan Friends of Australia Caucus, I’m confident our state will contribute in a big way.

For example, during visits in 2017 and 2019 to Australia’s HMAS Stirling submarine base in Perth, I met sailors from the Groton Submarine Base who were on rotation engaged in joint training. I was also briefed about Electric Boat’s non-nuclear technical assistance for Australia’s Collins-class submarine program. Clearly, given the quantum leap in technology called for in AUKUS, EB’s expertise in design and construction will be indispensable.

China changing the norms

When AUKUS was announced, our three nations made it crystal clear that the intent of the agreement is to strengthen international rule of law, which has been the backbone of 75 years of astonishing prosperity and comparative peace in the Pacific after the most destructive conflict in human history. Freedom of navigation and overflight, lawful sharing of natural resources such as fishing and mineral rights, and respect for the sovereignty of nation-states have been the keys to avoiding a repeat of the state-sponsored coercion and violence of the 1930s and ’40s. Unfortunately, China’s relentless “island building” in international waters, and the immediate militarization of those land masses — along with the astonishing buildup of the Chinese Navy and Coast Guard in the last decade and their coercive actions — has dangerously changed the accepted norms for lawfully sharing the “global commons” of the air and sea.

And that’s not neo-Cold War saber rattling. In 2016, the United Nations Law of the Sea Tribunal unanimously rejected China’s preposterous claims to territorial control of the vast bulk of the South China Sea as a breach of international law. It also refused to recognize China’s man-made islands as sovereign territory. China has vocally dismissed the ruling since then, and has brazenly escalated the aggressive behavior that the U.N. tribunal specifically condemned, most notably fortifying the manmade “islands.”

In 2016, Australia embarked on recapitalization of its aging Collins-class diesel-electric submarine fleet, which has been called on to operate at higher and higher levels of tempo in recent years. It contracted with the French Naval Group to build a new class of diesel-electric Barracuda submarines, which at the time seemed adequate. With the fast-changing threat in the region, however, and the “tyranny of distance” in the Pacific, Australia’s decision to opt out of diesel-electric in favor of nuclear propulsion is understandable. The undersea range of a nuclear submarine far surpasses diesel-electric, and given China’s highly advanced missile technology, avoiding any need for a sub to surface will greatly reduce the risk of detection. This is the reality of the situation — not a knock on the French Navy. As Prime Minister Morrison and President Biden clearly stated, the French Navy is a valued partner in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and AUKUS isn’t a security agreement that inherently excludes other allies. Instead, it’s one of many tools for like-minded allies to use in defense of the international rule of law.

Reaffirming peaceful coexistence

It’s also important to note that the AUKUS partners explicitly confirmed that the agreement doesn’t change Australia’s prohibition on nuclear weapons. The new submarine pact only opens the door to sharing nuclear propulsion technology — the submarines built by Australia will carry conventional deterrents only. As the Congressional Research Office opined in 1989, the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) “... does not prohibit non-nuclear weapon parties from using nuclear material for non-proscribed (i.e. non-explosive) military purposes, such as naval propulsion.” Australia’s diligent compliance with the NPT won’t change because of AUKUS.

Make no mistake — the solidarity of AUKUS nations, along with other democratic stakeholders in the region, is not intended to enflame rising tensions. It is built around a strategy of deterrence and engagement with like-minded nations seeking to reaffirm the peaceful co-existence that has reigned in the Indo-Pacific for 75 years. That peace is worth protecting for America, our allies, and for future generations. AUKUS will help us get it done.

Rep. Courtney is the chairman of the House Armed Services Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, which oversees all U.S. Navy shipbuilding. Courtney is also the co-chair of the bipartisan Friends of Australia Caucus.

Above, The U.S. Navy Los Angeles Class 688I fast attack submarine USS Toledo, SSN 769, cruises out the mouth of the Thames River and New London Harbor in 2005. SEAN D. ELLIOT/THE DAY