

# WILL WAL-MART EAT BRITAIN?



and what can we learn from US communities fighting back?

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the nef alternative mansion house speech 2005

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delivered by **nef**'s alternative chancellor for 2005:

**Stacy Mitchell** from the *US Institute for Local Self Reliance*

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“Thank you. It’s wonderful to be here with you tonight, and quite an honor to be your ‘alternative chancellor’ for the evening—or is that a title I get to keep for the whole year?”

Many thanks to the new economics foundation for organising tonight, and for inviting me to be with you. It’s been really wonderful to get to spend some time with an organisation that shares so much in common with our own philosophy and that I have long admired from across the Atlantic.

Even though I was very much prepared for it, expecting it and have experienced it before, it’s still a very strange thing to travel some 3,500 miles to a foreign country and find yourself presented with Starbucks and the Gap and Borders Books and Wal-Mart. I went to the Metro Centre just outside Newcastle a few days ago, which is identical to what we have all over the US—the fast food chains when you exit the motorway, the big-box stores, the Ikea’s and the Asda’s, the giant shopping mall. It just goes on and on and on. That is what we have all over the country.

Obviously, you are partway down this path. We are unfortunately much further along. So, what I’d like to do tonight is to talk a little bit about what our experience has been, and about the impact of this takeover by giant retailers, but also to talk about the growing backlash, and to leave you with some ideas about what you can do, if you want to get off this path yourselves.

I’d like in particular to talk a little bit about Wal-Mart, because Wal-Mart has devoured a huge section of the US economy and is devouring much of the global economy as we speak. This is the largest and perhaps most influential corporations on the planet.

It is the world's top buyer of just about everything from groceries and clothing to books and toys, and as the world's top buyer, Wal-Mart's power extends from its 5,000 superstores all the way back to the farmer's fields and to the factory floor and to the publishing houses—to everywhere that goods are made, all over this planet. Those are the tentacles that Wal-Mart sends out into the world. No other company on earth exerts as much control over how and where goods are produced.

In the US, Wal-Mart has skillfully cultivated a public image of itself as a folksy, "down-home" company. It's a friend to the little guy, a company that prefers the wholesome, small town life. Its headquarters is in the small town of Bentonville, Arkansas, in the Midwest—not at all the sort of place you would expect to find the seat of an empire. Indeed, Wal-Mart is much like George Bush in this respect: a powerful multi-millionaire born to one of the most powerful families in the country, educated at the most elite East Coast schools, who still manages to come off to most Americans as an average Joe from Texas, the kind of guy you might have a beer with down at the neighborhood bar.

It's much the same with Wal-Mart. This is the benign public image that they have cultivated. I think it explains how Wal-Mart was able to creep across our country, opening thousands of stores and becoming a juggernaut of staggering proportions before most Americans really knew what was going on, or even really noticed.

But that is beginning to change. That benign public image is bit by bit being transformed in the US right now, and I'm going to talk more about that a little bit later.

Just how big is Wal-Mart? It really requires a legion of statistics to get your head around just how large a company it is. In 1998, Wal-Mart was enormous. It took in US\$137 billion in revenue. That year *Money* magazine headlined a feature on the company with the query, "How Big Can It Get?" Over the next six years, Wal-Mart almost doubled in size. This last year it posted sales approaching \$260 billion, generating a surplus of about US\$18 billion, about half of which was counted as profit and about half of which was used to build new stores all over the world. In the US, Wal-Mart operates 3,600 outlets. These stores are mammoth. They average close to 200,000 square feet, many of them are much larger, especially the newer ones. In fact, they are so big and numerous that you could fit every man, woman, and child in the US inside a Wal-Mart store at one time.

Wal-Mart commands an extraordinary share of American consumer spending in just about every category. The company only started selling groceries in the late 1980s and now ranks as America's top grocer. It captures one of every five dollars we spend on food. Wal-Mart sells more clothing, furniture, toys, jewelry, music CDs, DVDs, magazines, and books than any other retailer. It accounts for nearly one-third of the market for many household staples, like diapers, shampoo, and toothpaste.

Wal-Mart is a giant of global proportions. It ranks as the 33rd largest economy in the world—bigger than the gross domestic product of most countries. Its purchasing power is vast. Last year Wal-Mart bought US\$18 billion worth of goods from China, meaning that it was China's fifth largest trading partner, ahead of the UK, ahead of Russia ahead of Germany. It did more business with China than all of those countries.

How big can it get? Wal-Mart plans to grow in three ways. One is to continue to saturate the United States. We are seeing Wal-Mart build 250,000-square-foot stores in towns of 5,000 people. They are filling in the country with a degree of saturation that is really quite difficult to imagine. The other area that they are going into is big cities—urban neighborhoods—an area that retailers like Wal-Mart have not had much of a presence in before. Wal-Mart recently declared New York City to be its next "frontier," implying that the city is a wilderness ripe for conquest. Indeed, New York is one of the few places left where you can still find a wonderful, healthy, vibrant economy of locally owned businesses. But 'never mind all those native small businesses', Wal-Mart seemed to suggest: 'This is manifest destiny'.

The second way Wal-Mart plans to grow is by conquering new industries, one of which is banking (quite alarming), and another of which is manufacturing. Wal-Mart already offers limited banking services at its US stores and now wants to become a fully-fledged bank, offering accounts and brokering loans. And then there is manufacturing: I don't know what the situation here is, but in superstores in the US, we have seen that a growing percentage of the products carried are store brand products, and now in the major superstores about 20 per cent of the products are actually commissioned and manufactured by the retailer itself. Wal-Mart manufactures or contracts for the manufacture of a huge percentage of goods. We are beginning to see them squeeze manufacturing companies out of the market entirely.

The third way that Wal-Mart plans to grow is by opening superstores around the world. More and more of its focus has been on international expansion. It's opening in places as far-flung as Brazil and China. It has recently announced plans to go into India. It is already the largest retailer in Canada and Mexico and, through its Asda subsidiary, the second largest retailer in Britain. Sales here in the UK account for about ten per cent of the company's total revenue.

There is no place on earth that is too unique, too environmentally sensitive, or too sacred for a Wal-Mart store. Recently, over much local protest, Wal-Mart erected a mega-store at the base of the Pyramid of the Sun in Mexico. The pyramid of the sun is two thousand years old, the largest pre-Columbian structure in the Western Hemisphere. You can climb the steps to the top—it's a long way up. But if you can get all the way to the top and look out you will be presented with a magnificent view, which now includes a Wal-Mart superstore.

Wal-Mart is the largest, but of course not the only giant retailer devouring our economy. Home Depot and Lowe's, which operate giant home improvement and hardware stores, have grown over the last 15 years to capture nearly half of all hardware and building supply sales in the US. Meanwhile, thousands of independent

hardware stores have closed. Independent grocers are disappearing. The top five supermarket chains have expanded from about 25 per cent of food sales just six years ago to 50 per cent today. Companies like The Gap dominate clothing sales. Blockbuster Video and Hollywood video account for almost one of every two video rentals.

Since 1990 the US has lost nearly half of its independent bookstores. Borders and Barnes & Noble now capture half of all bookstore sales. Ten thousand independent pharmacies have closed since 1990. Sales of consumer electronics, music and movies are dominated by Best Buy and Circuit City. The top restaurant chains continue to gain market share, edging out independent restaurants.

And of course, this is a global phenomenon. Many of these chains you will recognize as being here in the UK. You have your own Tesco, which I understand captures about one of every eight pounds spent in the UK. One of the big supermarket chains in my region is owned by Sainsbury's. All over the world we are seeing the cross-ownership and tremendous expansion of a relative handful of these giant retailers.

Why should we be concerned about these trends?

Let me begin with the most obvious and visible consequence. Corporate retailers have converted much of the American landscape to a vast wasteland of superstores, fast-food joints, strip malls, and asphalt parking lots. Mega-retailers in the US are consuming vast tracts of land as they expand. Here's a rather stunning statistic that I uncovered recently: the US now has 38 square feet of retail store space for every person, which is twice the amount of retail store space we had just 15 years ago, and it's far more than any other country. I am told that Great Britain has about seven square feet of store space per person. And of course since the vast majority of these stores in the US are the big-box stores, for every square foot of store space, we also have three square feet of parking lot and a group of roadways to connect them, consuming huge tracts of land.

It's not as though we actually need all of this store space; it's not as though the consumer demand is there for it. In fact, a staggering amount now sits empty. If you have been to the US recently you may have noticed that we not only have a lot of vacant retail storefronts in our downtowns, but we also have many vacant strip malls. About one in five of our enclosed malls is either already dark or is in serious financial trouble. We have thousands of empty superstores across the country. Some are companies that failed because of over-development or competition with other retailers, but many empty superstores actually bear the fading logos of very successful companies. Wal-Mart, for example, has 350 empty stores in the US. Almost all of them were stores that it abandoned to build a store perhaps twice the size, maybe a mile down the road, or maybe in the next town, but still in the same market area. All of these retailers follow this practice, with tremendous ecological consequences.

This pattern of development has meant that a country that is already car dependant is becoming ever more so. As downtown and neighborhood retailers disappear, even basic errands now require getting into your car and driving to a superstore. Here's another disturbing statistic: the amount of road miles that American households are logging each year just for shopping has grown by more than 40 per cent since 1990. This means the country as a whole is generating an additional 95 billion automobile miles each year just for shopping. That has a lot to do with Wal-Mart and Target, another big superstore retailer. That is one of the many hidden costs of this kind of development.

This vast landscape of hollowed out communities, sprawling strip malls and stores and endless asphalt has left many Americans living in places that no longer have any character, places that no longer look any different from other communities—places that are, as the author James Howard Kunstler has written, not really worth caring about. We have made this sacrifice in the name of economic progress. But what have we really achieved?

Virtually every worker connected to the Wal-Mart empire (or to any other superstore for that matter)—and you can trace this all the way from the clerk at the cash register back to the Chinese girl who made the product—lives in poverty, even though they work full-time. So meager are Wal-Mart's wages that many of its 1.3 million US employees actually depend on government-funded housing, healthcare, and food assistance programs to get by. A recent study pegged the annual cost to taxpayers of these programs, just for Wal-Mart workers, at US\$2.6 billion a year—yet another hidden cost of low prices.

Meanwhile, mega-retailers have destroyed vast segments of the middle class. Countless high-wage manufacturing jobs have been shifted overseas under pressure from big retailers. Many small manufacturers have been bullied and squeezed out of the market. And of course tens of thousands of independent businesses have closed. Their employees have been let go. Families that once supported themselves through their own enterprise are no longer able to do so.

Although cities and towns persist in thinking that such stores are going to be a boost to local employment, when you begin to add up all of the jobs losses associated with this kind of development, the losses invariably outweigh the gains that you get in jobs from the new superstores. Over and over again we find this to be true.

And the economic dislocation does not end there. Independent retailers tend to buy many goods and services locally. They hire local accountants, they bank locally, they source local products from other local firms. Every time you shop at a local store, it sends a ripple of benefits through the local economy. This is not true with a chain; they tend to function much more like a colonizing force in the sense that most of the dollars that go in actually leave the local economy.

One of the things that has been really helpful in our work is that, until recently, this difference was largely invisible; it hadn't been measured in any particular way. But several recent studies have begun to quantify this

economic value of local ownership. One of the best was done by a firm called Civic Economics in the Andersonville neighborhood on the northside of Chicago. In the 19th century, Andersonville was a small Swedish village. The city grew up and encompassed it and now it is this wonderful, dense urban neighborhood.

Andersonville has a great commercial street that goes down the middle of it—Clark Street, which is lined with independent businesses. You can get just about anything you need at a local store along Clark Street. Many of the businesses have been owned by local families for generations, and the Swedish heritage of the area still lives in businesses like Erickson's Deli and Wikstrom's Foods.

But recently all of these businesses have been recording declining sales as more and more chains open up in the Chicago area and surrounding suburbs. A neighborhood group decided to commission a study to look at the impact of this.

They found, quite interestingly, that if you spend US\$100 at a local store, it generates almost 60 per cent more in economic activity for the city compared to US\$100 spent at a chain store. The reasons are straightforward: the local stores keep their profits local; they have a larger local payroll; and they tend to buy more goods and services locally.

The ramifications of this are quite substantial. Communities that trade their homegrown businesses for global retailers sacrifice substantial internal money flows. They become more dependent on the ups and downs of the international financial markets and ever more subordinate to decision-makers in distant boardrooms. More and more of the decisions which affect our lives and our communities are increasingly made far away by boards of directors. They really have no connection at all to the places that they are affecting.

This increasing separation between those who make the decisions and those who feel the impact is one of the more destructive outcomes of corporate globalization.

There is a tremendous civic value to doing business with our neighbors—with people who know us by name and who send their kids to school with our kids, whose taxes go to support the local services that their families depend on, and who have a vested personal interest in the communities where they do business. No one really captures the texture of these relationships better, I think, than Jane Jacobs, who wrote a book I am sure many of you have read: *The Death and Life of American Cities*, in 1960. She wrote about what creates community, saying that it's not any one particular thing, but rather the many small interactions that occur in our everyday lives.

"It grows," she wrote, "out of people stopping by the bar for a beer, getting advice from the grocer and giving advice to the newsstand man, comparing opinions with other customers at the bakery and nodding hello to the two boys drinking pop on the stoop . . . hearing about a job from the hardware man and borrowing a dollar from the druggist . . . "

"Most of it is ostensibly utterly trivial," she goes on, "but the sum is not trivial at all. The sum of such casual, public contact at the local level. . . most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands . . . is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need . . . "

What is very interesting to me about this is that, writing in Manhattan neighborhood in 1960, she never specifies that the businesses are locally owned, although clearly they were. After all, when was the last time you borrowed a pound from Boots or got advice from Tesco? It was just part of the natural fabric of neighborhood business then, and it is dramatic how much things have changed.

So, how have we managed to get here? How have things changed so much? Some of it is obviously a result of choices that consumers are making and the appeal that superstores and the large chains have had. But what I think is really quite scandalous about the growth of superstores, in the US, and I think in some respects here too, is that these companies are as much a product of government policy as they are of consumer choice. I have been amazed, in the years that I have been working on this, to uncover, over and over again, ways that public policy at local, state, and federal level, really drives the growth of large corporations at the expense of independent businesses. You can find it in all sorts of ways.

Some of it is indirect in the US; some of it is in subsidies that we provide for cars and highways, and how the sprawl that is associated with that kind of transportation system supports corporate retailers over independent retailers.

But many of the benefits and the tilted playing field are actually quite direct. Just to give you one example: often when large companies open stores they will pick up development subsidies—a few hundred thousand dollars or a few million dollars from the local government—to help cover the cost of building the store. They get tax breaks everywhere they go. No one knows the total value of these subsidies in the US, but they total in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Of course there is nothing like that kind of money available for local business development.

We have uncovered in our research all kinds of other ways that government policy and our tax system is riddled with provisions that provide loopholes to large corporations while small businesses have to pay more than their fair share. It's really quite extraordinary.



The good news, as I said earlier, is that a growing number of people are becoming aware of the hidden costs of superstores. Organized citizen opposition at the grassroots has been growing by leaps and bounds throughout the US. It is becoming more widespread and intense by the day.

Just in the last few weeks, in Portland, Oregon, a huge coalition of neighborhood and other organizations rose up and defeated plans for a Home Depot, a home improvement big-box retailer that was slated to come into part of the city. Thanks to their opposition, the city has now reserved that site for small business development and housing.

In the California city of San Luis Obispo a few weeks ago, voters overwhelmingly rejected a massive big-box shopping center, which would have been something along the lines of the Metro Centre.

In New York City, there has been a rapid and powerful response from a very interesting coalition of small business owners and labor unions, which recently led a developer to drop plans for what would have been the city's first Wal-Mart store. The coalition has vowed now to keep New York City Wal-Mart-free, and they have billboards around the city now that highlight the damage Wal-Mart could do.

These are just a few recent examples from the last couple of months. It is a growing movement, and it has attracted a diverse range of people and organizations. We are beginning to see evidence of its impact. Wal-Mart has begun to spend quite substantially on television ads talking about its benefits to the community. Wal-Mart has upped its lobbying spending. We are also seeing investment advisory services come out and say maybe Wal-Mart's stock isn't that safe because of this growing community opposition. So we are beginning to have an impact.

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance got involved in this issue in 1999 when we published the book: *The Hometown Advantage: How to Defend Your Main Street Against Chain Stores and Why It Matters*. Since then we've been advising elected officials and citizens' groups all over the country on how to implement policies and strategies to support the local economy. We maintain an extensive online clearinghouse of models at [www.hometownadvantage.org](http://www.hometownadvantage.org)

I think that, to succeed, and to really change the tide, we have to pursue a three-pronged strategy, the first part of which involves public education; the second, public policy change; and the third, a concerted effort to reconstruct local enterprises and to rebuild the local economic systems that offer a viable alternative to corporate superstores.

In terms of each of these three things, in addition to the work we have been doing in our national advocacy and outreach efforts, one of the more promising developments concerning public education is occurring at the grassroots level with the formation of Independent Business Alliances—coalitions that exist in about 15 cities,

each with several hundred independent businesses as members. Independent Business Alliances have been carrying out wonderful education and public marketing campaigns that talk about the value of supporting locally owned businesses and about the hidden costs of chain stores.

Just to give you an example, I'll tell you about the first Independent Business Alliance which got started in Boulder, Colorado, in 1998. It began when a very small group of about half a dozen business owners (there was a local bookstore owner who really galvanized it) got together and realized they faced extinction if they did not do something. And so, having the idea that they could find strength in numbers, they formed the Boulder Independent Business Alliance, which very quickly grew to over 300 independent businesses in the community—a broad range of local businesses—and they launched an educational campaign.

Soon, Boulder was blanketed with messages about the value of locally owned businesses. There were storefront decals in every independent business in town identifying them as being locally owned, talking about putting dollars back into the local community. Bumper stickers and posters urged residents to: "Put your money where your house is. Support local businesses." Bookmarks given out at every local bookstore listed all the independent bookstores in town, and when you flipped them over they listed the top five reasons to support independent bookstores. Paper cups at local cafes likewise carried this message. The message was advertised in the newspaper and magazines. Everywhere you went in Boulder, you were presented with this message, with ideas about why the local economy mattered. You couldn't miss it. Because it became so visible, it started to be discussed very heavily on local radio and in local newspapers, and it galvanized a fascinating and extensive public debate. It has been very successful, to the point now where there are a couple of very large chains in downtown Boulder that are closing. I have been told by business owners there that local ownership has become a selling point—in the same way that organic has become increasingly something that people are looking for.

So successful were they that they have now inspired independent business owners in other cities to undertake similar initiatives. They have all developed their own local advertising campaign around the issues. In Austin, Texas, their slogan, which you can see all over town, is "Keep Austin Weird", which seems to really work down there. In Portland, Oregon, they say "Think Local First." In Raleigh, North Carolina, it's "Keep Your Capital in Raleigh." In St. Louis, Missouri, it's "Build St. Louis." This movement is one of the things that I think is really positive and very encouraging because it's reaching people at the local level in a very tangible way.

One of the other things I've really enjoyed about watching Independent Business Alliances grow is that it's giving independent businesses a greater voice in the media and in public policy, because they now have a collective voice that they didn't have before.

There are two national umbrella organizations—the American Independent Business Alliance and the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies. (You know when an idea's time has come when two separate organizations think of it at the same time!) The national umbrella groups work to seed and nurture these alliances at the local level.

The second area I mentioned was changing public policy so that it begins to support rather than undermine local economies. This I think is essential to reversing the current trends. We have been working with cities and towns across the US, particularly around local planning law, because this is an area where there is a great deal of local authority, and there are tools that communities can use to limit the amount of chain store development and to support small-scale local businesses.

One of the things that we have been working on, for example, is helping a number of cities adopt laws that require proposals for new retail development to undergo an economic and community impact analysis. Essentially a developer has to prove that the development is going to be a positive benefit to the local economy and to the community—that it is not going to harm the downtown; that it's not going to have an adverse impact on the community—in order to win approval. It's very interesting to watch how the local debate changes once these kinds of studies are done, and cities have the facts on the table about what the real economic impacts are going to be and not just what the developer says they will be.

We've also helped a number of cities adopt laws that prohibit stores over a certain size, essentially banning superstores from coming into a community and insisting that there be development on a scale that's more appropriate and more centrally located.

Some cities and towns have gone even further and restricted or banned the entry of formula chain businesses into the community. One community, for example—Arcata in northern California—has an ordinance that says there cannot be more than nine formula businesses at any one time, which happens to be the number that they had when they passed the law. They have a wonderful town square filled with local businesses. There are two local grocery stores, an independent bookstore, a local movie theater, a furniture store, a computer shop, and so on.

Initially these kinds of laws were implemented in small towns. Increasingly we're seeing them move into bigger cities. San Francisco just enacted a city-wide law that limits and places special restrictions on formula chain stores. It's carried out on a neighborhood by neighborhood level. So essentially, the city has given individual neighborhoods the authority to say "no" if they don't want to have chain retailers come in, or to scrutinize those stores more heavily before allowing them in.

Those are some of the kinds of policy initiatives we are pursuing at the local level. We are also working at the state and federal level to do things like get rid of the tax advantages and subsidies I mentioned earlier, step up enforcement of competition laws, and channel more economic development resources to small business development.

The last thing I wanted to mention in terms of the three kinds of strategies is the work that we need to do to rebuild local economies.

A lot of hope is to be found in what has happened in the food sector, just over the last ten or so in terms of the explosion that we have seen in farmers markets and community-supported agriculture. The revival of local food seemed impossible not that long ago, and now it's a growing movement, so I'm hopeful that we're going to begin to see that in terms of retail stores, that we're going to begin to see a rebirth.

There are two parts to this. One, how do we keep the independent businesses that we still have? Critical to this I think are wholesale buying co-operatives. For example, many hardware stores in the US belong to one of three national buying co-ops, which reduces their costs and provides a system of efficient distribution.

We are now seeing this model spread to lighting stores, bicycle dealers and all kinds of other independent businesses. The model helps independent retailers gain clout in terms of negotiating with big manufacturers and suppliers. Wholesale co-ops are also a way to rebuild the distribution system for independent retailers that has been heavily damaged over recent years.

Independent retailers are also co-operating to succeed in e-commerce. This is a real challenge; we are seeing more and more people shopping online, but how do we begin to localize those dollars? Independent bookstores in the US have come up with a really wonderful solution. Several hundred independent bookstores have joined together and created an e-commerce site, called Booksense.com. If you go there, they have the same two million titles that you find on Amazon.com, but when you buy a book the sale is credited to your nearest participating locally-owned bookstore. It cost several million dollars to create the back-end infrastructure for this site, and the only way the independent bookstores were able to have something that sophisticated was by pooling their resources and doing it as a collective endeavor.

Again, we are beginning to see that model spread to other retail sectors. So co-operation, I think, is going to be key in terms of saving existing independent businesses.

The second problem we face is: how do we cultivate new entrepreneurs, and how do we create new independent businesses?

A big part of this challenge is simply getting local economic development authorities to shift their thinking. So much of the way we have thought about economic development has been: how do we get some big outside corporation to come in and build a store, or build a factory or whatever it may be? And I think the way we actually have to think about economic development is: how do we meet local needs by growing local businesses? Once we begin to do that, and make that shift in thinking, it begins to open up all kinds of doors.

One of the first things we encourage towns to do is simply to undertake a market analysis to look at where there's unmet demand in the local economy: what is the consumer capacity for hardware or groceries; where are there gaps; where are there needs that local businesses are not filling?

The next step is to think systematically about how to fill those gaps.

One of the wonderful things that happens when you have that kind of analysis and hard numbers is that it becomes much more enticing to local entrepreneurs and to lenders to begin to get involved in building those kinds of businesses.

Other kinds of things—none of this is rocket science—is having a low-interest loan program for new entrepreneurs and setting up mentorship programs. A lot of the knowledge about how to run a small business has been lost. We don't grow up thinking about local business as an occupation anymore. Many businesses have closed, and they're not being passed on to younger generations. One of the things that we have recommended in working with communities is tying successful entrepreneurs to new entrepreneurs just getting started.

Another idea is an independent business incubator. I was in a neighborhood in Chicago recently and they had a building that was co-operatively managed at the neighborhood level. It was filled with tiny retail storefronts, and the idea was that someone who had an idea for a business could come in and, for very little money, rent a small space, get started, and see if they had a market. Then, after six months or a year, they could 'graduate' and move elsewhere in the neighborhood and lease a full-scale storefront and build out the business.

I was getting a tour of this neighborhood and, as we walked up and down the street, the person who was giving me the tour was saying, "that business was started in the incubator, that business, and that business", and sure enough, they had a whole neighborhood of independent retailers that had managed to get started through the incubator because it was a very easy way for an entrepreneur to get an initial foothold.

Community ownership is another solution. Just in the last couple of years, more than half a dozen communities in the US have developed community owned department stores that sell affordable clothing, shoes and housewares. One of the most successful is the Powell Mercantile in Powell, Wyoming, which is owned by 800 local families and managed by a board of directors made up of local civic and business leaders. Community

ownership has become another option for developing a homegrown business that meets the needs of the community, in the absence of having an entrepreneur willing to take it on.

We face a very daunting challenge, but the future health of our economies, our environment, and our communities depends on our response. Reversing the current trends towards global corporate consolidation and centralized power may seem impossible. But I'd like to leave you with the words of former US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, who said, "Most of the things worth doing in the world had been declared impossible before they were done."

Thank you."

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**Stacy Mitchell** is a senior researcher with the Institute for Local Self-Reliance. A widely recognized expert on the impact of mega-retailers and the benefits of locally owned businesses, Stacy has worked with communities across the country to implement policies and strategies that limit superstore expansion and rebuild local economies. Her book *The Hometown Advantage: How to Defend Your Main Street Against Chain Stores and Why It Matters*, now in its fifth printing, has provided essential guidance to grassroots groups and elected officials fighting on the front lines to save their towns from Wal-Mart and other big retailers. Stacy has written articles for magazines and newspapers, and produces an acclaimed monthly electronic newsletter, *The Hometown Advantage Bulletin*, which reports on new research and innovative initiatives. She chairs the board of the American Independent Business Alliance, a coalition working to give locally owned businesses a stronger voice in public affairs. She lives in Portland, Maine.

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