

Reasons Why Government Should Be Turned To Only When Necessary

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This article is one of SCSS President Stephen M. Krason's "Neither Left nor Right, but Catholic" online columns. It makes the argument, in accord with such principles of Catholic social teaching as subsidiarity, that government should undertake tasks in a political society only when truly necessary. It points to many problems that experience has shown in the U.S. tend to develop when functions are turned over to government, especially in domestic areas. He made a presentation based on this column as part of a panel on "What the Role of Government in Contemporary America Should Be, in Light of Historical Experience and Catholic Social Teaching" at the 2011 SCSS National Meeting-Conference.

In these times when there is much discussion about what the role of government should be and a strong belief has developed among many that it is simply too big and involved in too many things, it is worth considering exactly what the problems of "too much government" are.

First, it is commonly said that government is inefficient. It is full of employees who essentially have jobs-until-retirement and it lacks the kinds of incentives to do well that are found in business and elsewhere in the private sector. That is, you have to produce and do a good job or else the competitors will win the customers, and you'll be out of business. (To be sure, however, such inefficiency is approximated in many of today's mammoth, oligopolistic corporations which have diminished incentives because they have guaranteed their "market share.")

This isn't to say that all activities that need to be done must be done in a market context. As the Church has pointed out, there are many human needs that the market simply cannot satisfy or satisfy well. That does not mean that they default to government; this is the role of "civil society"—voluntary organizations, nonprofit groups, the Church's and other religions' charitable works, and simply family and neighbors. This is, partly, the "economy of gift" that Pope Benedict speaks of in *Caritas in Veritate*.

Second, government—this obviously becomes more the case as one moves up to its higher levels—becomes more remote and distant from the people, and so more unaware of what their lives and true needs are like.

Third, in making decisions about what government should be doing—supposedly “for the people”—politicians are often driven, in fact, less by their actual needs or the true public interest than by what is likely to further their—the politicians’—personal or electoral interests. If they do further the interests of the “public,” it is often—or usually—only one part of the public.

Fourth, politicians have shown themselves often not to be trustworthy—at least in the sense of keeping their long-term promises to the public—as seen in how they have allowed the Social Security system to be jeopardized by diverting money over many decades from the Social Security Trust Fund to pay for other governmental programs and schemes, instead of insuring it will be available for the purposes people were taxed for.

Fifth, government easily falls prey to interest group pressures—especially large, powerful ones. For example, large companies often support massive governmental programs—such as the case of the insurance and health-care interests that supported Obamacare—because of what they would gain from it. Further, they often use the regulatory regimen to get favorable regulations so that they can gain advantages over competitors. What organized interests want is not necessarily what is beneficial for the public or promotes the common good. The story of interest-group government emerging from the expansive welfare and regulatory state set in motion by the New Deal is an old one, perhaps first explored in depth by Theodore Lowi’s famous 1969 book, *The End of Liberalism*.

Even when organized interests do not have economic motives in mind—as with the plethora of “advocacy groups”—they have a historical tendency in the U.S. to take immoderate, extreme, absolutist positions. This leads to rigid, unreasonable public policy that fails to accommodate appropriately the wide range of differences and needs within a community. This is a common theme of writers such as Philip K. Howard, who points to such examples as how the New York City transit system had to cut overall service because of the need to purchase only buses with wheelchair lifts because of the demands of the disability rights movement for “mainstreaming.”

Sixth, there is also a lot of *ill-conceived* compromising in the making of public policy. Much legislation is a patchwork affair, where the policy and law that is enacted or promulgated by executive agencies is often contradictory, convoluted, and plain irrational. Citizens and businesses often do not know what is expected of them, but still face punishing legal consequences if they transgress the often-arbitrary interpretations made by government officials.

Seventh, government decisions and programs often have unintended and unforeseen consequences. An example is how the Medicaid program,

according to some scholars, may not actually have advantaged the poor that much—there was already a great amount of charitable care available before its enactment—but instead, in effect, transferred income from some middle class people (taxpayers) to other middle- and upper-middle class people (health-care professionals). The decline of statesmanship is partly responsible for this, so that instead of serious reflection about public policy decisions and where they can lead, we too often see political decision-makers responding to popular immediate demands or vaguely good-sounding initiatives.

Eighth, governmental programs do not have a roaring success rate—even when more and more money is poured into them. As I discuss in my forthcoming book, *The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*, it is hard to point to one Great Society initiative that was truly effective in the long-run.

Ninth, government programs eat up more and more money as time goes on, irrespective of whether they work. Also, once they are in place, they are hard to dislodge or even substantially change—partly because of the clientele they build up and partly because of governmental and bureaucratic inertia. What better example could one think of than American public school systems?

Tenth, government programs to “take care” of people often have the effect of diminishing personal and family responsibility. This has been much discussed with reference to numerous social programs and, of course, is a logical result of weak human nature. To be sure, even if there were a healthy, vigorous civil society, there would probably still be the need at least for a limited “safety net” for those who truly cannot care for themselves. That is hardly the situation in the U.S. or other Western countries today, however.

Eleventh, when government takes on a task, it means it is going to be carried out by bureaucrats. In fact, as government and legislation become more complex, legislators defer more and more judgment and even law-making authority to them. Bureaucrats often have their own agendas, however—both political and in terms of perpetuation of their agencies and jobs. These may not coincide even with the expectations of the legislators who enacted a program, and of course unelected bureaucrats are not directly accountable to the public.

The twelfth problem is related to the eleventh. As Pope John Paul II said, the bureaucratic agencies of the contemporary welfare state, are often “dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients” (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 48). Procedures, often unreasonably inflexible, seem to take precedence over the public benefit an agency is supposed to be providing.

Finally, the basic reality of government is that it is coercive. If private entities are providing something, they at least cannot attach a range of conditions—some unreasonable—that can be backed up by the full force of the law. The consequence of government programs, in short, almost inevitably is a diminution of liberty. When government benefits are provided, there always seems to be a *quid pro quo* nowadays. Just ask the private, even religious, colleges and universities who take part in the federal student loan program.

Man is a social creature, and depends on others in part for securing his well-being. This does not mean, by default and across-the-board, reliance upon government. What is said here should make clear the folly of such an attitude.