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COMMENT

CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT

The various crises of today - including the renewed energy crisis - have focussed attention on the government and its efforts to deal with critical situations.

Government has been criticized for developing into a monster, a dragon threatening to control and diminish our lives. I would revise this image somewhat: a monster, yes, but more a dinosaur than a dragon, a huge, lazy, poorly adaptable, ever-feeding body with a small brain.

The central government's tentacles may be reaching out everywhere - but this invasion is at one time or another something that people have demanded. It has become the custom to run to Washington to bail out the cities, to help pay for welfare and public services, to negotiate minority problems, to settle disputes and allocate resources. The tentacles are in response to our urgent prayers.

Bureaucrats and politicians are human beings and respond to basic human urges; and perhaps we ought to look at humble human tendencies underlying the impressive façade of gigantic decision-making. The first urge is, Take care of Number One (the law of survival); second, Stick with your group (man is a social animal); third, Once entrenched, do as little as possible (man seeks to satisfy his desires with the least exertion).

There are lots of sincere, hard-working people in government, but we cannot help but notice the prevalence of the other kind. We see the first urge at work in the endless stories of bribes and deals, dubious pensions and emoluments, and people leaving office richer than when they entered. Second, we see each department and bureau aggrandizing itself and being more loyal to itself than to public service. Third, we have all had the experience of not being able to find the right office or official answerable to a wrong or a problem or a foul-up.

These, perhaps even more than tyranny, are the damaging influences. They are not necessarily bad traits - they are human - but they are misdirected. With an economy of restricted opportunities, people enter government who might better be performing some productive work in the economy. The economic problem underlies the problem of government. A solution to the economic problem, as envisaged by the Single Tax, would divert much of the tendency toward big government.

Somewhere along the line we also need a revised attitude toward government. I don't know which comes first, an economic solution or a revised attitude. But sooner or later, we will all have to come to the realization that matters are ultimately not in the hands of those in office but in our own hands.

R.C.