

# THE CORE ISSUES

by Dan Sullivan

The world is full of problems and while many issues are very important there is competition between community groups for attention, funding and volunteers. While some people are content to fix single issues, others can see the deeper connections between a myriad of problems and seek to address the core issues which require structural or systemic change. In this article Dan has identified several core issues that impact virtually all other issues. It is our job to show how they impact other issues and how working on core issues will be more effective for everyone involved.

## Privilege

Behind all issues lies the problem of privilege -- legal mechanisms that give some people artificial advantages over others, enabling them to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Political privileges give leverage in the political system, ultimately conferring a political monopoly over others. Economic privileges are similarly leveraged over time into economic monopoly.

Three privileges stand out. The core political privilege is the way we choose leaders. What was supposed to be citizens deliberating and choosing officials to serve them has degenerated into a competition by those who want more and more political power over a largely passive electorate. The economic privileges are a land tenure system that allows some people to monopolize the earth and its resources and a monetary system that lets private institutions lend money that was created out of nothing into circulation.

Other economic privileges include privately owned public utilities, monopoly franchises, over-extended intellectual property laws, subsidies, artificial restrictions on competition, and policies that benefit established businesses to the detriment of potential new competitors.

They tie together because people with economic privileges help those in office keep their political privileges and those in office reciprocate.

## Why Core Issues?

Many issues are important, but solving core issues makes solving other issues easier. It might seem quicker and easier to go for a "quick fix" on one issue at a time, just as it might seem easier to swat a fly than to shovel, treat and cover manure. In the long run, however, taking on single-symptom issues is as futile as swatting flies in a stable.

There was a great focus on core issues in what is known as "The Age of Enlightenment." That focus has been lost, and the political climate of the past hundred years has offered us endless choices between conservatives denying that there is a problem and liberals pretending that every symptom can be treated without digging too deeply into underlying causes. Both sides perpetuate core privileges.

There are two ways to arrive at core issues. One is to determine what causes each problem and treat each cause as an underlying problem. Then one finds the cause of each underlying problem, and so on. As one digs deeper, one finds that many seemingly different problems are caused by the same underlying problems. When one can go no deeper because there is no underlying cause, the core problem has been found. However, most people assume they can go no deeper even though there are still underlying causes. They might be impatient, intimidated by the magnitude of the underlying causes, or just plain stumped. In many cases, people have motivations other than solving the problem itself, or they crave potential allies who have other motivations. These alternate motivations or agendas divert people into turning their back on core problems and treating symptoms instead.

The other way is to start with fundamental principles and critique our laws and political arrangements in light of those principles. Such an approach is easier and more reliable, but it requires faith that sound principles lead to sound solutions. People who are fixated on immediate relief from pressing problems tend to view principles as abstract and beyond their capacity.

Actually doing something meaningful about underlying causes is also daunting because each vested interest is ready to fight to protect its own privilege, and few vested interests with significant clout are ready to oppose privilege. Rather than mobilize the entire public against core privileges, political opportunists find it easier to advocate programs that address symptoms. Yet, sooner or later, the consistent failure of these programs to solve problems must lead us to address the core issues.

## Core Issues vs. Big Issues

An issue might be overwhelmingly important and still not be a core issue. For example, there is rarely a bigger issue for a country at war than the war itself. The question of what are the root causes of war remains, however. Virtually all wars, even so-called religious wars, are fought over land and resources, money, and political control. This makes the land question and the money question more fundamental, even though the question of war and how to end it may be more pressing.

## Reason vs. Pressure

As we have drifted into a system of privileges, we have become accustomed to fighting rather than reasoning. Those opposed to big-business abuses line up behind the Democratic Party and those opposed to big-government abuses line up behind the Republican Party. What we fail to appreciate is that big business and big government are partners in privilege, and that lining up behind one of them to do battle with the other only affects which is the senior partner and which is the junior partner. To lessen the dominance of big business, it is necessary to reason with Republicans to show how their legitimate concerns can be addressed without entrenching big business.



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Similarly, reducing the size of government requires reasoning with Democrats. Indeed, it even requires reasoning with leaders within big business and big government to assure them that it is not personal, and that they, too, can get their legitimate needs met by accepting the reduction and elimination of privilege. Most will not support such efforts, but reasoning with them will reduce the ferocity of their opposition by showing respect, and will occasionally win agreement from influential members.

Even doing battle over issues has served to entrench privilege, as those with privilege have enough resources to win any fight over their most essential core privileges. They are able to finesse

other issues to insure that, over all, privilege itself remains intact. The real struggle for justice, then, is not between institutions, but within them. Each member of any organization must choose whether to put his energy into opposing privileges that interfere with his organization's goals or into promoting countervailing privileges that advance its more legitimate goals. Even within the individual there is a constant conflict between pursuing advantage and pursuing justice.

## Democracy

The core political issue is that the system we call "democracy" (or, if you prefer, a "democratic republic") is not actually democratic. Democracy means that government serves the interests of the people it governs -- that it is subservient to them. Most people think of democracy as synonymous with elections, but the great democracies of history did not even have elections. Genuine democracy at any level of government will give vitality to that government. Even the governing bodies of private organizations will function better by following genuinely democratic principles.

The false view that democracy boils down to a contest by candidates to win our favor has led to election reforms that "level the playing field" between the candidates, but do nothing for the public interest. Such reforms only make matters worse, because they further shift the emphasis to the approach of candidates actively pursuing the vote of a passive electorate. In a genuine democracy, the people are the active factor, and the candidates for office are merely job applicants hoping to be chosen.

## Land and Resource Monopoly

Land is not produced; it is appropriated. Land and natural resources are monopolized far more than capital or wealth generally. Moreover, no wealth can be produced without access to land. Throughout history, economists, philosophers and statesmen have recognized that the monopolization of land and natural resources is a core economic problem.

People ordinarily think of land in terms of acres and fertility, which were the most important aspects in agrarian societies. In modern commercial society, the value of location dwarfs agricultural values. Also, the electromagnetic spectrum is like land in that particular frequencies are reserved for particular title holders. Broadcast media monopoly is essentially the same as land monopoly.

Throughout history, philosophers, statesmen and economists have argued that the amount of land people could hold should be limited, and that privately held land should be taxed on its value. When land value is sufficiently taxed, people do not monopolize land by taking more than they can effectively use.

## Money Monopoly

Advanced societies cannot function without money. When money is loaned into circulation, its lenders and re-lenders can charge interest on values that they did not create. It is impossible

to pay back debt-money with debt-money, because the debt (including interest) exceeds the amount of money issued. As a result, society's producers are increasingly dependent on money lenders. Even businesses who do not borrow must deal with the fact that their employees, customers, suppliers, etc., are immersed in debt, and that a contraction of credit can disable the entire economy. The problem is not private lending of earned money, but the lending of new money into circulation. Government should issue money by spending it into circulation directly.

**Our task is to show how these core issues underlie the symptomatic issues, and how working together on core issues can be more effective for everyone involved than working separately on symptoms.**

## **Other Monopoly Privileges**

### **Public Utilities and Right-of-Way Monopolies**

The core privilege enjoyed by privately owned public utilities is the right of way -- the exclusive right to deliver water, sewer, gas, electricity, telephone, internet and cable television services along public streets and other rights of way.

Privately owned turnpikes and railroad tracks are also right-of-way monopolies. The only difference between them and utilities is that the utilities deliver one particular product to its service area, while turnpikes and railroads allow people and multitudinous products to be delivered from place to place.

These distribution systems should be publicly owned at the most local level of government possible. In some cases, the government should own and run the entire system. In others, private vendors should bid to provide services to the government, or the rights of way should be open to all on equal terms. We can see this with public highways and public airways, where traffic safety is enforced by the government, but the vehicles using these highways and airways are mostly private.

## **Franchises and Contract Monopolies**

From military contractors to the food and gas purveyors at turnpike islands, businesses serve us through the government rather than serving us directly. To the extent that government awards contracts and franchises in an uncompetitive manner, or makes more awards than can be justified, the awards confer privilege. Those who enjoy the awards reciprocate by supporting the incumbents who supported them.

## **Self-Regulating Monopoly Businesses**

Government agencies regulate businesses, and business lobbies regulate the regulators. The most notorious (at the moment) are health insurance and pharmaceutical companies, but one trade after another has lobbied for licensure to make it more difficult for competitors to enter the market. Even where some certification is appropriate to insure safety, the licensure requirements go far beyond what safety concerns justify.

## **Discriminatory Taxes, Subsidies and other Transfers**

Most taxes are not charges against privilege, but levies against personal or business initiative. To the extent that the benefits do not match the taxes, some are paying for the benefit of others. Much ado is made about payments to the poor, even though the poor would, in a just system, enjoy far more in the form of a share of land or a share of its rent. Better examples are taxes that discriminate against small business to benefit big business, taxpayers served by poor roads paying to build good roads for others, etc.

Aggravating this are direct subsidies and special tax exemptions, ostensibly to advance some societal goal. These subsidies invariably go to those who are already privileged and politically well connected, at the expense of others who are already overtaxed.

In some cases, transfers are not part of the budget, but are still a product of bad law. For example, limiting the liability of corporations has the effect of blocking people from recovering just damages from those corporations. It has the same effect as a law that would transfer money from the victims back to the offending corporation after proper damages were awarded.

## **Cutting the Gordian Knot**

It is not enough to point to core issues and declare them important. We accept that most people are interested in symptomatic issues. Our task is to show how these core issues underlie the symptomatic issues, and how working together on core issues can be more effective for everyone involved than working separately on symptoms.

Dan Sullivan is an American whose ability to clarify issue I greatly admire. He regularly writes on the email discussion group called Land Theory (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/landtheory/>) and this article is from his website [savingcommunities.org/issues/](http://savingcommunities.org/issues/).