



“The government should do for the people what the people are unable to do for themselves.”

IF it be consistent with right principle to have a formal agency of society of delegated, limited and specified powers—government—it follows that there are principles, if we could but find them, which prescribe the appropriate limitations.

The search for these principles has proved elusive, as history seems to attest. Failure to find them has led some distinguished thinkers—sometimes called philosophical anarchists—to decide against any government at all. It has led others—sometimes called socialists—to resolve in favor of the omnipotent State; let government control everything!

Other thinkers, who refuse to approve either anarchism or socialism, settle for what is more a plausibility than a principle: “The government should do for the people what the people are unable to do for themselves.” Thus, unwittingly, some avowed conservatives lend support to the socialists. In practice, this plausibility works as follows:

- *The people express inability in that they will not voluntarily invest the fruits of their own labor in an enterprise that promises to deliver mail to those who choose to isolate themselves. So, let the government deliver the mail—with Rural Free Delivery.*
- *The people, when organizing railroads, will not voluntarily extend their services to communities with few passengers and little freight. Therefore, have government compel unprofitable operations on the private roads or, as in many other countries, form a government road to perform such “services.”*
- *The people will not willingly reclaim land for agriculture at a time when government pays people to withdraw good farm land from production. Therefore, let the government carry out uneconomic irrigation and reclamation projects.*

- *The people will not willingly and with their own funds build huge hydroelectric projects to serve areas that can be served more economically by other forms of generated power. Hence, we have TVA and a growing socialism in the power and light industry.*

- *The most up-to-date example of this “system” of determining governmental scope is in the field of astronautics. People simply will not, on their own, invest billions of dollars for astronautical weather reporting, for photographs of the moon’s hind side, or for radio conversations—a century or more hence—with a people who might possibly exist in interstellar space. Ergo, let government do these things the people are “unable” to do for themselves!*

This formula for governmental action implies that the people lack the resources to perform such services for themselves. But, government has no magic purchasing power—no resources other than those drawn from private purchasing power. What we have here is a rejection of the market, a substitution of pressure group political power for the voluntary choices of the individuals who vote with their own dollars. This criterion for the scope of the state leads away from private enterprise toward the omnipotent State, which is socialism.

The enormity of a project is no excuse for governmental interventionism. When the market votes “yes,” capital is attracted, regardless of the amount required, to do the job. Witness our larger corporations, bigger than Hoover Dam or what have you!

Government has no right to use force or coercion for any purpose whatsoever that does not pre-exist as the moral right of each individual from whom the government derives its power and authority.*

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*For further information on this point, see *The Law* by Frederic Bastiat (76 pp. \$1.00 paper; \$1.75 cloth) and my *Government: An Ideal Concept* (149 pp. \$1.50 paper; \$2.00 cloth), both obtainable from The Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., Irvington-on-Hudson, New York.