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Government often does more harm than good

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Most everyone believes that government is an essential institution, necessary to do what people cannot do on their own. And that sounds like a pretty good justification for the state. But it rarely describes what government actually does.

For instance, most Americans take for granted the opportunity to drive into a gas station, fuel their auto, and get back on the road. But not in New Jersey and Oregon. These two states ban self-service stations.

Earlier this year legislation was introduced in both states to end the prohibition. In Oregon the state house voted for repeal in rural counties. In New Jersey legislative leaders announced that members would not be allowed to cast a vote.

Prohibitionists argue that self-serve stations are bad for the elderly, handicapped, and, yes, those of limited height. But then why does New Jersey allow “self-serve” restaurants (buffets), supermarkets (fill your own cart), retail stores (try on clothes yourself), doctors (go to his or her office), and much more? Shouldn’t these businesses also have to ensure that every special need is met?

Of course, there are those other 48 states in which people seem to get by without a ban on self-serve pumps. State Senate President Stephen Sweeney, one of the chief obstacles to getting New Jersey out of the gas pumping business, argued: “In New Jersey, we grew up with it. People have gotten used to it. We like it.”

Who wouldn’t prefer to have someone else pump gas for you, all other things being equal. However, do they really want to pay from 8 to 20 cents extra per gallon?

In fact, it was not consumers who originally demanded the law. The prohibition came in decades ago at the behest of smaller gas station owners, who feared they would be undercut by stations owned by oil companies.

Even if the great majority of people prefer full-service pumps, there’s no need for legislation. Businesses gain from catering to consumer demand. If people are willing to pay more for someone to provide “full-service” gas, stations will offer that option.

Examples like this demonstrate how government serves clamorous interest groups before the public. Such abuses don’t eliminate the justification for government. But we should be far more skeptical of those lobbying on behalf of programs and regulations.

Politicians and bureaucrats routinely come to us claiming that they want to help us. Far too often they do much more harm than good. That's another great reason to shrink government.

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