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I Am Being Lied To. Again.

Every now and then I get a newsletter/propaganda piece from my state senator. For the better part of two decades, Toni Harp has been lauded and honored by a slew of progressive and liberal groups for her legislative work. She has not heretofore been some manner of Sharon Angle clone.

Senator Harp's recent communication began in this way: "Dear Neighbor, everywhere I go constituents tell me the same thing: they want state government to focus on growing jobs and balancing the budget. I got the message."

And there is the tragedy of American politics in our era. Senator Harp has forgotten the basic principles that ought to be informing her legislative activities. Instead, she has announced that she has bought into this Cato Institute/American Enterprise Institute nonsense.

It must also be acknowledged that job growth in this State has lagged badly in recent years. The State of Connecticut's budget is badly out of whack and has been for as long as I can remember. The State of Connecticut has, for decades, employed a series of tricks and artifices to produce the illusion of a balanced budget. The bills have come due. So "growing jobs and balancing the budget" are hardly meaningless sideshows.

But the function of government is not, and never has been, to "grow jobs" and to balance the state budget. The function of government is, in the words of the preamble to the State Constitution (the government's "mission statement"), to "...secure and perpetuate the liberties, rights and privileges which [the People of Connecticut] have derived from their ancestors."

The function of government is to permit the citizens of this state to live in relative safety by providing police, fire and emergency medical service. Its function is to provide for the education of the children of this State. Its function is to plan, build and maintain transportation and public works infrastructures. Its function is to safeguard and protect the waters, forests and other natural resources of the State. Its function is to ensure that adequate facilities are available to maintain and

further the physical and mental health of the citizens of the state. Its function is to provide a working civil and criminal court system that safeguards the right of citizens and permits the fair and speedy adjudication of disputes. Its function is to ensure access to fairly priced public utility services. Its function is to ensure that the rights of workers are safeguarded. Its function is to ensure that banks doing business in the State are sound and prudently managed. Its function is to ensure that the poor, the needy and the disabled are adequately provided for. Its function, in brief, is to do the things that no one person or group of persons can do for him/her/themselves.

None of these functions fairly include "growing jobs and balancing the budget." I am not in the least bit sure as to exactly when it became the received wisdom that state government should be first and foremost the handmaiden of business and the lenders who fund the state deficit by purchasing state bonds. But I really do wish that all of this pandering to our worst corporatist instincts would stop at once.

A significant part of the problem inheres in the fact that what needs to be said in order to attain elective office in these nasty and mean-spirited times is both false and detrimental to governance once elected. One can scarcely turn on the television these days without some candidate for office bemoaning "wasteful government spending." Of course, the precise contours of such "wasteful government spending" are never defined, largely because there isn't any. No political candidate has the honesty to say that "wasteful government spending" is a short-hand phrase for "policies I do not agree with." There is a difference. The Pentagon's \$700 hammer is wasteful government spending, whether to spend an additional \$3,000,000 on higher education is a policy dispute.

Everyone involved in state government, from the governor on down to the lowliest back bencher in the general assembly, has told us that the State of Connecticut's budget does not contain "fat." They are correct. The "fat" was cut from the State budget years ago. The folks in Hartford started cutting muscle a long time back, and they are now in the process of hacking limbs off the body politic.

The reason for this is an irrational and violent fear of raising revenue. When you begin the discussion by taking tax increases off the table, you inevitably must cut essential state services, borrow the difference, or impose a thousand "fees" and "surcharges" that burden all users of State services. When you can cut no more but must preserve state services, and when you realize that the State's credit card bill will inevitably come due, rational decision making becomes impossible if tax increases are "a non-starter." To fund needed program A requires that needed program B be cut. Ain't no fat there.

A good deal of this could be stopped at once if the folks seeking public office would level with the public. Instead, we have found ourselves in an ever worsening spiral of moronic behavior, resulting in someone as compassionate and rational as Senator Harp sounding like a cheerleader for the Connecticut Business and Industry Association (the ventriloquist that has run Hartford for decades). When Office-Seeker A stands up and says "We need to cut wasteful spending" Office-Seeker B says "I'll cut even more!" and when either of them gets to Hartford he or she finds that there is no wasteful spending to cut. So the public is understandably disillusioned. This will change when Office-Seeker A says "I will cut wasteful government spending" and Office-Seeker B responds "You're lying. There is no wasteful government spending to cut. Show me what you plan to cut and show me how it would make so much as a three cent difference in anyone's tax bill." But no, it is easier to try to out-demagogue the other guy than to talk sense to the public.

No one in state government has merited anything other than a grade of "F" in his or her ability to explain to the public that government has been a sound steward of its tax revenues and that it is not a broad-scale case of "The Three Stooges In Charge." As a result, compassion has been sweated out of the system, cynicism runs rampant and the entire edifice is in danger of collapse, as the citizens of, say, California have found out to their woe.

Here's the dirty little secret: Despite decades of being hammered by Republican propaganda that government is the enemy and that taxes are evil, the American people have retained (although they have suppressed it) a basic, fundamental belief that fair taxes, fairly collected and fairly spent, are the price we pay for a civilized society. That belief will continue to be buried under piles of muck so long as office holders and office seekers believe that playing to the worst instincts of the electorate will result in success. Instead of a Tea Party movement, what we really need is a "Stop Lying To Me" movement. It would do wonders for the actual operation of government.