



Arthur Foulkes: Changed view of Constitution leads to growth in government

By Arthur Foulkes
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— If you think about it, everything you do is because of some sense of uneasiness or desire to make some improvement in your world.

While we may feel completely contented at particular moments in life, for the most part, we are motivated by a desire to bring about some change we view as beneficial.

In short, we are always looking to make things, in our view, better. This is probably a fundamental truth about all human beings and probably has been for all time.

For most of human history, despite this desire to improve things, most human beings struggled just to survive. A bad harvest one season might mean starvation for thousands or tens of thousands of people.

Then, suddenly, on a small part of the earth, people started to make material progress at an astonishing rate. Within a few generations, the idea of mass starvation became practically forgotten. New technologies emerged, lives lengthened and the quality of life improved for millions.

What allowed prosperity to arrive in this one small part of the earth? In a word, freedom.

The United States was founded on a radical idea – that people are inherently free and governments are only created to protect this freedom.

This founding principle for decades stood behind the U.S. Constitution, which spells out specific and limited powers for the federal government.

Unfortunately, over time, that founding principle was largely forgotten and was replaced with a sort of pragmatic approach to government. Where at one time certain acts of government were viewed as unconstitutional because the founding document did not authorize them, eventually, acts of all sorts were considered constitutional unless specifically banned by the document.

Perhaps never has this been clearer than right now. In the past year, the government has become the key player in the housing, financial and even American automotive sectors. While government is already a key player in energy and health care, it appears it will also become “the” key player in those sectors soon as well.

The importance of this shift from a belief in individualism to collectivism is hard to overstate. Economically, it is a path guaranteed, in my view, to fail. Central planners cannot possibly have the information necessary to run one individual’s life, let alone the lives of us all. Morally, it is also a road to failure, creating a highly politicized society of dependence as opposed to one based on productivity and individual responsibility.

In the long run, no one benefits from the growth of collectivism except those who presume to dictate to the rest of us. And because these people, and their supporters, claim to have science and expertise on their side, any dissent is dismissed as uninformed or backward. (Yet any agreement with them is viewed as “enlightened” and correct).

Central planning is doomed to fail. The reason America became the first place on earth where human beings shattered centuries of want and frequent starvation was that individuals were allowed unprecedented levels of freedom to pursue their goals and dreams. They were also given the freedom to enjoy the fruits of their labors. A lapse into government managed collectivism will bring only dictatorship and economic failure.

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Constitutional scholar Roger Pilon of the Cato Institute has written that, as faith in the idea of natural human rights faded, judges began to fall back on another theory as the basis for the legitimacy of the Constitution – “the will of the people.”

During the so-called Progressive Era, Pilon notes, “a crucial shift took place in our conception of government, when we stopped thinking of government as a necessary evil, created to secure our rights, and started thinking of it instead as an instrument for doing good.”

This is clearly where we are today. The idea that government can wisely determine the correct level of downtown investment, health care spending, home ownership, immigration, interest rates or the right number of college graduates has firmly taken root in our thinking.

A past presumption in favor of individual freedom, respect for private property and voluntary interaction has been replaced with a presumption in favor of central planning, collectivism and obedience to the “general will.”

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