

Governing for Poetry

Can nothing be done without the public fisc?

By Michael Tanner
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Who knew that American poetry was in such desperate shape, tottering on the brink of oblivion without massive government intervention?

Just a couple of years ago, Senate majority leader Harry Reid was worried that Republican budget cuts would spell the end of the Cowboy Poetry Festival. Now House minority leader Nancy Pelosi lauds Obamacare for enabling Americans to quit their jobs if they want to “write poetry.” The federal government spends \$154 million per year to support the National Endowment for the Arts, which funds, among other things, poetry. We even have a government-subsidized national Poet Laureate, Natasha Trethewey.

Without the federal government, there might well be no poetry at all in the United States.

Sarcasm aside, insisting on such support is emblematic not just of a federal government grown too large, costly, and involved in ever more of our lives, but of the ethos of modern politics. Nothing good, it seems, is going to happen without government action.

The reality is that most government programs are at best a failure and at worst do positive harm to society and the people they purport to help. Civil society — that vast conglomeration of activity undertaken by individuals in the absence of government coercion — has proven to do the most good.

Take, for example, efforts to help the poor. Despite spending more than \$18 trillion since the start of the War on Poverty — nearly \$1 trillion last year alone — government welfare programs have failed to significantly reduce poverty rates.

Despite this demonstrated record of failure, welfare advocates insist that there is no alternative to an ever-growing welfare state. Without government welfare programs, millions of Americans would be starving in the street. There is a deep belief that if government did not intervene, Americans would never show compassion on their own.

Yet Americans have repeatedly shown that they are the most generous of people. In 2012, for instance, Americans donated more than \$316 billion to private charity and spent some 10 billion hours volunteering to help others.

Moreover, the evidence suggests that Americans would give even more if their efforts weren't being squeezed out by government. As far back as 1899, Frederic Almy, Secretary of the Buffalo Charity Organization Society, gathered data on public and private charitable activities in 40 cities. Almy ranked the cities in four groups from high to low in both categories of charity. He found that cities in the highest two categories of private charity had the lowest levels of public charity. Those with higher levels of public charity tended to have lower levels of private charity. Almy concluded that "a correspondence or balance between the amounts of public and private relief appears to be established."

Charles Murray's more recent research found similar results: When government welfare spending increases, private charitable giving tends to decline. Conversely, when welfare programs are cut — or perceived to be cut — Americans step up and increase their charitable giving. As Murray explains, "if government is not seen as a legitimate source of intervention, individuals and associations will respond. If instead government is permitted to respond, government will seize the opportunity, expand on it, and eventually take over altogether."

Yet, the instinctive reaction of modern American liberals is to default to government. Look, for instance, at the dust-up over the proposed Arizona legislation that would have allowed businesses to refuse to provide some services on the basis of religious beliefs. As a strong supporter of same-sex marriage, I was dismayed that the Left's immediate reaction to the refusal of a handful of businesses to participate in same-sex weddings was that it should be illegal. In the absence of widespread government enforced discrimination, such as existed in the Jim Crow South, there would seem to be numerous non-governmental tools — boycotts, public shaming, etc. — available to punish bigoted business owners. Sometimes the correct answer is not "there ought to be a law."

Of course, the Right often falls into this trap, as well, believing that actions that they disapprove of — smoking marijuana or selling pornography, for instance — should be crimes. No less than liberals, too many conservatives believe that virtue can and sometimes must be compelled by the state.

All of this bespeaks a lack of faith in one's own convictions and moral authority. When George Washington contrasted government to civil society in his farewell address, warning that "government is not reason, it is not eloquence — it is force," he was making an important distinction. Government relies on force and coercion to achieve its objectives. In contrast, the civil society relies on persuasion — reason and eloquence (and, yes, sometimes poetry) — to motivate people.

The evidence suggests that we would be much better off with a bit less reliance on government, and a bit more reliance on civil society.

More often than not, there ought not to be a law.

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