

NATIONAL REVIEW

Government Cannot Solve Every Societal Problem

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The Western world can breathe easy. British prime minister Theresa May has solved one of the great crises of our time: She has appointed a Minister of Loneliness. Tracey Crouch, who is currently the Tory undersecretary for Sports and Civil Society, will be charged with leading a government-wide effort to “develop a strategy” for ending “loneliness and social isolation” among adults.

It is easy to have a laugh at the expense of the Brits, of course, although just last year President Obama’s surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, wrote an article for the Harvard Business Review arguing that the societal problem of loneliness needs more attention from business and government. But there is something bigger at work here. There is now a general belief, one increasingly shared by politicians and voters of both parties, that every problem, large or small, can only be solved by the government.

The Declaration of Independence says that governments are instituted among men to secure our unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Today, too many people see government as the solution to whatever ails us.

Obesity a problem? We need the government to regulate what we eat. Wages too low? The government should set them. Are people doing things that you think are immoral? Criminalize those things. “There ought to be a law” has become the all-purpose political rallying cry.

And while omnipresent government may be the ethos of modern politics, it does not come without a cost.

The most obvious one, of course, is the modern leviathan state. We have a federal government that spends more than \$4 trillion per year, is \$20 trillion in debt, and regulates nearly every aspect of our lives. State and local governments follow suit. From our bedrooms to our businesses, there seems no area of our lives that lawmakers don’t believe it is their job to oversee, restrict, subsidize, or otherwise intrude upon.

This leaves us poorer, of course, but it also leaves us less free. In the most recent Human Freedom Index, which looks at both economic and personal liberties, the United States ranks 17th. As Gerald Ford once said, “A government big enough to give you everything you want is big enough to take away everything you have.”

Moreover, those who rely on government to solve all problems will likely be disappointed. Most government programs are at best a failure and at worst do active harm to society and the people they purport to help. As Milton Friedman once put it, “If you put the federal government in charge of the Sahara Desert, in five years there would be a shortage of sand.”

Civil society — that vast conglomeration of activity undertaken by individuals in the absence of government coercion — has proven to do far more good. Yet, insidiously, our over-reliance on government saps the vitality of civil society and non-government alternatives. “If government is not seen as a legitimate source of intervention, individuals and associations will respond,” Charles Murray once noted. “If instead government is permitted to respond, government will seize the opportunity, expand on it, and eventually take over altogether.”

Moreover, relying on government to solve every problem in society inevitably leads to political disagreements about how to solve those problems. If everything in our lives becomes political, then there is no respite from the political. This can only increase the polarization of society, driving Americans farther into their respective bunkers.

Obviously, there is a proper role for government, and the limits of that role will always be the subject of political debate. But perhaps the next time we encounter a problem in society, we should think twice before asking government to solve it for us.

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