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Everything You Need to Know about Government, in One Story

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July 24, 2017

Every so often, I run across a chart, cartoon, or story that captures the essence of an issue. And when that happens, I make it part of my “everything you need to know” series.

I don’t actually think those columns tell us everything we need to know, of course, but they do show something very important. At least I hope.

And now, from our (normally) semi-rational northern neighbor, I have a new example.

This story from Toronto truly is a powerful example of the difference between government action and private action.

A Toronto man who spent \$550 building a set of stairs in his community park says he has no regrets, despite the city’s insistence that he should have waited for a \$65,000 city project to handle the problem.

Retired mechanic Adi Astl says he took it upon himself to build the stairs after several neighbours fell down the steep path to a community garden in Tom Riley Park, in Etobicoke, Ont. Astl says his neighbours chipped in on the project, which only ended up costing \$550 – a far cry from the \$65,000-\$150,000 price tag the city had estimated for the job. ...Astl says he hired a homeless person to help him and built the eight steps in a matter of hours. ...Astl says members of his gardening group have been thanking him for taking care of the project, especially after one of them broke her wrist falling down the slope last year.

There are actually two profound lessons to learn from this story.

Since I’m a fiscal wonk, the part that grabbed my attention was the \$550 cost of private action compared to \$65,000 for government. Or maybe \$150,000. Heck, probably more considering government cost overruns.

Though we’re not actually talking about government action. God only knows how long it would have taken the bureaucracy to complete this task. So this is a story of inexpensive private action vs. costly government inaction.

But there’s another part of this story that also caught my eye. The bureaucracy is responding with spite.

The city is now threatening to tear down the stairs because they were not built to regulation standards...City bylaw officers have taped off the stairs while officials make a decision on what to do with it. ...Mayor John Tory...says that still doesn't justify allowing private citizens to bypass city bylaws to build public structures themselves. ...“We just can't have people decide to go out to Home Depot and build a staircase in a park because that's what they would like to have.”

But there is a silver lining. With infinite mercy, the government isn't going to throw Mr. Astl in jail or make him pay a fine. At least not yet.

Astl has not been charged with any sort of violation.

Gee, how nice and thoughtful.

One woman has drawn the appropriate conclusion from this episode.

Area resident Dana Beamon told CTV Toronto she's happy to have the stairs there, whether or not they are up to city standards. “We have far too much bureaucracy,” she said. “We don't have enough self-initiative in our city, so I'm impressed.”

Which is the lesson I think everybody should take away. Private initiative works much faster and much cheaper than government.

P.S. Let's also call this an example of super-federalism, or super-decentralization. Imagine how expensive it would have been for the national government in Ottawa to build the stairs? Or how long it would have taken? Probably millions of dollars and a couple of years.

Now imagine how costly and time-consuming it would have been if the Ontario provincial government was in charge? Perhaps not as bad, but still very expensive and time-consuming.

And we already know the cost (and inaction) of the city government. Reminds me of the \$1 million bus stop in Arlington, VA.

But when actual users of the park take responsibility (both in terms of action and money), the stairs were built quickly and efficiently.

In other words, let's have decentralization. But the most radical federalism is when private action replaces government.

Editors Note: Since this article was originally published, the local government tore down Astl's \$500 stairs, citing "safety standards," and plans to replace it with a \$10,000 set.

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