

THE FUNCTIONS OF GOVERNMENT

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With the extension of Government activity into so many fields formerly left to private initiative, it is not at all strange that there should be growing discussion of the question whether these increasing government activities are justified. Few discussions of this subject, however, result satisfactorily; this is because the real issue is usually side-stepped.

A and B discuss the merits of prohibition. A contends that prohibition is desirable, and supports his contention with what seems to him a good reason; B opposes with a counter reason as to why prohibition is wrong. And after an interminable exchange of opposing views A and B stop exactly where they began. Why? For the same reason that nearly all discussions are similarly futile and useless,—there is no pre-agreement on a premise as a starting point, no agreement on a basic principle by which to test the correctness of any view held. It is not possible to add up two columns of opposing opinions, subtract, and arrive at a convincing difference. Without agreement in advance on a principle, a discussion nearly always becomes, must become, merely a talk-feast,—a valueless hodge-podge of superficial opinions.

Where and how shall we find a basic principle by which to test the propriety of any and every activity of government, actual or proposed? In seeking such a principle let us begin at the beginning, deciding, first, what the proper purpose of government should be; then selecting the principle, or rule of action, to be followed by lawmakers in advancing that purpose; and finally, discovering the functions necessary for government to perform in applying the principle selected. If, in this procedure, we adhere to sound reasoning, we shall emerge from the realm of vague opinion secure in the knowledge that our conclusions can be satisfactorily demonstrated.

(1)—What is the proper purpose of organizing government? It seems quite safe to take for granted that there will be general, if not universal, agreement that the only proper purpose of founding government is to promote the general welfare of the community.

(2)—What is the principle, the rule of action, by which government can best advance this purpose? In seeking such principle let us first marshal and enumerate all possible principles from among

which a choice must be made. This it is quite possible to do with accuracy,—the same degree of accuracy as that with which we declare that "a thing is equivalent to the sum of all of its parts". For the avowed aim of government cannot but be, on the one hand, to maintain the greatest possible degree of equality of individual liberty among its citizens, or, on the other hand, to maintain more or less inequality. It is obvious that any departure from equality must constitute corresponding inequality. The three principles then, from among which a choice is necessary, are:

a—Governmental action shall be limited to insuring that, as nearly as possible, everyone shall have opportunity to do as he will up to the point of infringing the equal opportunity of another;

b—The same as "a" excepting that government may depart therefrom, within certain limits prescribed by the governed;

c—Government shall be clothed with unlimited power over the individuals comprising the governed.

Subjecting the above to examination we find: "c" is abhorrent and unacceptable; "b" constitutes a complete self-contradiction—as will at once become apparent if we attempt to specify wherein and to what extent a governing body shall be authorized to deviate from the standard set in "a",—for it is like stating that seven times seven always equals forty nine, excepting that it sometimes doesn't.

Therefore in the pursuit of the purpose of government (to promote the general welfare), we are forced, willy nilly, to adopt "a" as the principle to which government shall adhere in all of its activities and law making.

(3)—If, then, the only proper purpose of government is to promote the general welfare, and if the only principle, or rule of action, in accord with this purpose is to insure that, as nearly as possible, every citizen shall have opportunity to do as he will up to the point of infringing the equal liberty of another, the next question to present itself is: what are the FUNCTIONS of government, — what must government do, to apply this principle?

To the writer it is inconceivable that these functions exceed two in number; first, government must exercise the police power (in various forms), preventing one from infringing on the person or prop-

erty of another; and second, must maintain equality of opportunity among all.

At first thought it might seem impossible to reduce the activities of government to such simplicity—impossible to have government abandon so many of the activities it now assumes,—activities of government to which we have become more or less accustomed. But just as one step in a wrong performance necessitates two others to support it, so every time government departs from its two simple functions a condition is created which demands a further and a further departure, until we find ourselves in our present precarious and threatening situation, where step is following step in increasingly rapid succession toward a fate which is inevitable, unless the direction of our course be reversed.

Of these two proper functions of government, the exercise of the police power promptly appeals to practically all of us as quite logical, and its propriety would be contested by few. But as to the other government function, that of maintaining equality of economic opportunity, this is not so easy of understanding and acceptance, doubtless due to the fact that there is such a meagre knowledge of basic economic principles.

Equality of economic opportunity can be secured only by creating a condition of "more jobs than men", using that word "job" to include all of the activities of Capital and Labor. And this condition can be attained only by government collecting all ground rent and thus making it unprofitable to hold any natural resources (land) out of use.

The most convincing way to answer the question "Do the inhabitants of the African jungle live by eating food?" would be to demonstrate that all men live by eating food. With a clear conception of (1) the proper purpose of government, (2) the only practical principle through the application of which government can attain that purpose, and (3) the two necessary functions of government in applying the principle, it takes but a moment's reflection to decide, negatively or affirmatively, any question that may arise involving the propriety or impropriety of governmental action. If a proposition stands the test, if it be found in accord with the above principle, yes!—if not, no! We should never lose sight of the vital significance of this five word phrase "the universality of a principle".