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Should government be a tool of enterprise?

Ray Deonandan

In Ontario during the early 1990's, the socialist provincial government instituted a system of compelled unpaid days for all public employees. This was an attempt to reduce the payrolls and avoid layoffs. A failed experiment that helped sow the seeds for a subsequent hard-right government, this flirtation with voluntary salary restraint inadvertently allowed some perspective into a larger concern: the public perception of the role of government.

A struggling student during that time, I was working as a receptionist for a government office. As the bureaucracy was still adjusting to the effects of this novel legislation, certain days saw the absence of key employees who were availing themselves of an unpaid day of leisure. On one of those poorly-staffed days, an irate caller was dismayed that the appropriate staff were unavailable to address his particular bureaucratic concerns.

"If I ran my business like you guys run the government," he said, "I wouldn't have a business anymore!"

His point is well taken, and probably quite valid: this fractured staffing policy would be poorly served in a commercial environment, possibly disastrously so. Why, however, does he assume that a government should be run like a business?

North American governments suffer from a preponderance of two types of individuals: lawyers and business people. Hence the major governmental concerns tend to be legislative or commercial -- constitutional debates and free trade agreements are good examples -- to the exclusion of other important issues, such as environmental and health concerns. The latter two issues crop up in formal debate only when they intersect with financial or business concerns.

Government and news media often assume that law and commerce are the matters that most concern the average citizen. There is a compelling argument against this assumption. The vicissitudes of the stock market, for example, make up a good third of a given prime-time news broadcast, but perhaps fewer than 10 percent of the general population has ever invested directly in stocks. The media may be forgiven for this imbalance in coverage because they must cater to their specific audiences. Perhaps their market research shows that the wealthy and the business-minded watch disproportionately more prime time news.

However, a problem arises when governing bodies mistake the market research of news bodies for an accurate poll of voters' interests. The imposing monolith of media appears to be working synergistically with a growing trend to administer all bodies and functions from the briefcase of a corporate lawyer. CNN's obsession with lawyers may rival America's unexplainable acceptance of entertainers as political commentators, but it also threatens

to force a public embracing of corporate and legalistic reckoning upon all levels of human interaction.

Despite our society's image as overly litigious and wealth-driven, we expect our governance to embrace principles that transcend legalistic point-mongering and pecuniary singlemindedness. Yet North American governments increasingly pursue agendas relevant to the privileged business class.

The post-Cold War shift to the Right has forced this misperception of a commercial role of government into a further extreme. Not surprisingly, choice ambassadorial positions in both government and academia are now being awarded to successful businesspeople, giving them the status previously afforded only to philanthropists and intellectuals. By virtue of wealth alone, one can aspire to the honoured position of statesman. Why do we continue to deem this acceptable?

Many business people, when asked what the role of government should be, would consider the dictation of monetary policy and the nurturing of a commerce-friendly environment to be of paramount concern. Few would place social or environmental issues before matters of economic amelioration. Yet a governing body has a mandate to administer all aspects of human interaction, not just a jurisdiction's commercial dynamic. We continue to equate "captain of industry" with "community leader" when, in fact, these two aspirations have little in common.

Why is there an obsession with government as an instrument of business concerns? Government's role is not to make a profit, nor to garner a clientele or develop a product. As the single largest employer in many jurisdictions, governments cannot afford to espouse basic business principles of competition or efficiency at all costs. Their primary concern must be the well-being of each citizen that they claim to represent, regardless of whether this service contributes to the government's financial improvement.

"Downsizing" for the sake of competitiveness, as is still popular among businesses, cannot therefore be an option for a government unless serious budgetary consequences are predicted.

As conservative influences press for the introduction of "zero debt" legislation, we may see the last vestiges of a noncommercial government extinguished. The incursion of debt is considered a mechanism that allows governments some influence over their economies. When this ability is removed by an ideology espousing corporate-style streamlining and immoderate self-sufficiency, a government is nothing more than a large inefficient corporation with no loyalties greater than the bottom line.

A more appropriate view of government, one voiced by Canadian writer Michael Ignatieff, is of an umbrella under which fair treatment and resource disbursement may be sought regardless of sex, creed or race. When the universality and balance of this umbrella are compromised, societies revert to their base impulses, as was observed in the former Yugoslavia. This is admittedly somewhat of a legal model, but one in which commerce is not the overriding principle. This ideal would be greatly compromised by --if not anathema to-- a corporate government whose paramount concern is always a balanced budget and a businesslike demeanour.

And so, to that gentleman who phoned our office many years ago, I reply: "Yes, sir. That's why you work in a business and we work in a government."

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