

Government

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This is the ninth in a series of essays on the [politics of care](#) and [economics of hope](#). The others are listed at the end of this essay. This essay also happens to come in video form.

As with the other essays, I acknowledge the input of my wife, Jacqueline, into this essay.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fr7Ggx0-Jjw?si=z7gdIVJHagx9j5Qc>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=3rb8q-1b142fe-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&font=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

There is no Debate Ammunition for this video.

This is the transcript:

In the previous essay in this series, I suggested that society is not simply a collection of individuals. It is the network of relationships through which we become human, learn to cooperate and realise our potential. I also argued that societies create institutions because those relationships do not sustain themselves by accident. Trust has to be earned. Knowledge has to be passed on. Justice has to be maintained. Shared resources

have to be managed. None of these things happens automatically.

That immediately raises another question. If society depends upon institutions, why do we have government?

That might sound like an odd question. Governments have existed for thousands of years. We are so accustomed to living with them that we rarely stop to ask what purpose they actually serve. Instead, political debate usually begins somewhere else. We argue about whether government should be larger or smaller. We argue about taxation, public spending, regulation and borrowing. We ask whether governments interfere too much or too little.

Important though those questions may be, I think they come too late. Before asking how government should behave, we first need to ask why government exists at all.

The answer is, I think, surprisingly simple.

There are some things that societies can only do together. Individuals can achieve remarkable things. Families can achieve more. Businesses, charities and voluntary organisations all make invaluable contributions to society. But none of them can, by themselves, create the legal framework within which everyone lives. None can issue a currency accepted throughout society. None can guarantee justice for all. None can protect shared resources. None can decide collectively how today's choices should take account of tomorrow's consequences.

For those tasks, societies create government.

Government is, therefore, not something standing outside society. Nor is it an unfortunate burden imposed upon otherwise free people. It is the most vital way in which society organises itself to pursue purposes that individuals acting alone cannot achieve.

That distinction matters. Much political debate assumes that there is an inevitable conflict between society and the state. Government is presented as though it were something external, forever threatening individual freedom. Sometimes that is true. Governments can, undoubtedly, become oppressive. History provides many examples. But that is not because government exists. It is because governments, or those who capture control of them, sometimes forget what they are for.

The question of what they are for is, then, the one that matters, and, based on what I have previously suggested in this series, the answer should be obvious. If society exists to create the conditions in which people can realise their potential, then government exists to help society achieve that purpose.

Economic growth is not its purpose. Balanced budgets are not its purpose. Satisfying financial markets is not its purpose. Those things may sometimes help government

achieve its objectives, but they are never objectives in themselves. Government exists to serve society, and since society exists to help people realise their potential, that, in turn, must also be the purpose of government.

That is why I think the best way to understand government is to think of it as society's steward.

A steward is entrusted with responsibilities on behalf of others. A steward does not own what is being cared for. Nor is a steward free to neglect it for immediate advantage. Good stewardship requires looking after something of lasting value so that it continues to benefit those who depend upon it, both now and in the future.

That, I think, is exactly what government should do.

It should protect the conditions that allow society to flourish.

It should uphold justice because cooperation depends upon fairness.

It should invest in education because knowledge is one of society's greatest resources.

It should support healthcare because people cannot fulfil their potential if they are prevented from doing so by avoidable illness.

It should protect the natural environment because no society can flourish by destroying the living systems upon which it depends.

It should maintain confidence in the monetary system because modern economic life depends upon trust.

In other words, government should concern itself not simply with today's prosperity but with society's long-term wellbeing.

Once government is understood in that way, a number of consequences follow.

The first is that government must genuinely represent the people on whose behalf it acts. If power is routinely exercised by minorities against the wishes of majorities, stewardship has already failed because government has ceased to act for society as a whole. Electoral systems must deliver maximum chance of representation in that case.

The second is that government must remain close to the people whose lives it affects. Many decisions are best made locally because local people understand local circumstances better than distant administrations ever can. National government has indispensable responsibilities, but that is not an argument for unnecessary centralisation. Good stewardship depends upon knowledge, and much of that knowledge is local.

The third is that participation in government must be open to everyone. Democracy cannot work well if only those with wealth, leisure or unusual freedom have the opportunity to take part in it. Public service is work. It carries responsibilities. It should therefore be recognised and properly rewarded so that governing communities is open to people from every background.

The fourth is that government must always look beyond the present. Stewardship is impossible if today's gains are purchased at tomorrow's expense. Governments therefore have responsibilities not only to those who elect them but also to those who will inherit the consequences of the decisions they make. That is true of the natural environment, but it is equally true of education, public infrastructure, knowledge, democratic institutions and much else besides.

These are not separate political preferences. They all arise from the same idea. If government exists to act on behalf of society, then it must be organised in ways that continually draw it back towards the people it serves and the future for which it is responsible.

That leaves one final question.

If government is society's steward, what exactly is it expected to steward?

The answer to that question is one of the oldest ideas in accounting, but one of the most neglected ideas in modern economics.

It is the idea of capital, in its broadest sense. It is to that topic that I will turn next.

Other essays in this series

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