

WHERE IS ALBERTA HEADED?

Harry Kits: *The task of government, God's servant to do good*

At CPJ we have a basic framework which informs our work which talks about “who does what” in society. We variously call this framework “circles of society”, “differentiated responsibility”, “subsidiarity”, or the new term used by John Hiemstra, *Textured social responsibility*.@ We believe that a variety of players in society have responsibility for dealing with well-being, with how we live together, with the common good. Within that variety -- churches, businesses, government, labour, and other sectors -- we look at who should take responsibility for what parts of a particular issue, such as poverty, employment, healthcare or caring for the environment.

How do we make sure that each of these can fulfill its own calling, its part of the task? How do you make sure that churches can do what churches are supposed to do? What businesses are supposed to do? And what is it that they are supposed to do is part of the question we reflect on. We've got documents on our CPJ website (www.cpj.ca/about) which reflects on these questions (*Guidelines for Christian Political Service* and *Charter of Social Rights and Responsibilities*).

But when we think about the calling of government, it has a special responsibility. It's a “servant of God”, as talked about in Romans 13, “to do good.” We translate that to mean that government has the responsibility of working with the other institutions to do public justice, to care for the common good. There is an underlying servant responsibility to make sure that other institutions have what they need to do good. They need the resources, abilities, and freedoms to do that work.

Government's own responsibility is found here. Fundamentally, as we describe it, it's to do public justice. That's the title of our organization: Citizens for Public Justice, calling government to that task. Government's responsibility is to work with all parts of society to ensure that each can fulfill their calling and ensure the well-being of all within the context of making sure that creation stays healthy. The government of Alberta needs to care for all of those within Alberta, but also bear in mind the context of Canada and of the world. How we look at that bigger picture becomes part of the equation.

We heard from Mark Anielski about the complexity of issues and the different ways of measuring what is well-being. Who has what responsibility for which parts of that? There were different things about time, about the availability of jobs, the “ecological footprint” that we have. Who has what responsibility?

Who is responsible for that fellow, whom Marjorie Benz spoke about, who doesn't have cooking facilities and doesn't have teeth? And who takes the first job? Who helps others to make sure that they take their own responsibility?

We at CPJ would say that government has an integrating role. So, if we say that something needs

to be done, we argue that government has a responsibility in a number of different ways. Sometimes it means to support other institutions to do their job. Sometimes it needs to make sure that unions have the freedom to be able to do their job to represent their workers. There's also the responsibility to encourage businesses to take their responsibility to provide good services.

Sometimes government does things on its own in certain circumstances. The provision of healthcare in Canada has been seen to be primarily a communal task and governments have large responsibilities for that. Sometimes it does things in partnerships with other sectors. And sometimes it has to use its *power of the sword*, as the Bible says, to force other institutions to take up their responsibilities when they are not doing so.

The public justice perspective doesn't say government should do everything. But today we seem to be in a curious time when many governments, including most provincial governments and often the federal government, don't really believe they should exist at all. Or should only exist in a dramatically reduced form. To be sure, there have been important reasons for this development: debts, deficits, bureaucracies and various ills in society which don't seem to be addressed. So governments have had problems to grapple with.

But the argument that's often used is that we shouldn't have government or not much government at all. My sense, in looking from Ontario, is that Alberta wanted to be the leader in getting rid of itself as a government. Establishing the lowest taxes, the lowest program spending, the lowest welfare rates, the lowest number of people on welfare were some of the arguments that the Alberta government put forward for this goal. Ontario, which sometimes thinks it runs the country, decided it would imitate that and began to say the same thing a few years later. It tried to be the lowest in taxes, beating out Alberta if possible. The feds respond in kind to this trend. Meanwhile the newest "Liberal" government, in B.C., sounds like it is jumping on the same bandwagon.

At the same time, each of these governments believes that whatever limited things it does, its overall goal is advancing economic prosperity. In fact, economic prosperity ends up being part of the argument for getting rid of government. When government does want to do things **B** and most governments will say that they do want to do social programs and healthcare and so on **B** if you look carefully at the rationale in budget speeches and budget documents **B** the real reason to do that is for economic prosperity. Doing social good in society is not in and of itself a good thing in most of those arguments, if you read budget speeches carefully. Rather, it's because those programs and services are a base for economic prosperity and economic growth.

This was the argument used to reduce deficits, to reduce taxes, to cut programs. But now there's a curious development, which Alberta is hitting first. With strengthened economic positions, possible surpluses, and a significant lessening of deficits, there is suddenly a crisis of vision for governments. They ask themselves: "What are we supposed to do if we *can* do some things? And why would we do them, when part of the argument has been to get rid of ourselves?"

We believe government needs to renew a sense of confidence, understanding and vision about its legitimate role. It needs to talk as if government is important and has a calling from God; not just

to be bigger, but to figure out what is its calling. We've had conversations, as CPJ staff, with two federal ministers on this particular point, once with Jane Stewart and once with Paul Martin. We made this point when we were addressing the question of the role of government to address child poverty. We said: can't you, as the federal government, take a leadership role to say that government does have responsibilities, that government is a good thing, and it has these kinds of tasks to undertake?

Frankly, the answer given was that federal/provincial relationships make it difficult for us to be too much in the leadership on these kinds of questions. On one level, that's an odd thing, but it's also understandable given the particular issues with which we were dealing, child poverty and income programs. So we replied, can't you use positive language and rationales for what you do?

Here is the challenge for today. Perhaps it is time for the Alberta government to be challenged to take the lead, not about cutting government, but about beginning to talk about the value of government. Several years ago at a CPJ meeting, I threw out the idea of how great it would be if Albertans would be willing to drive around with bumper stickers which proclaimed "proud Alberta taxpayer." Well, some local members made up those bumper stickers and distributed them.

The same theme is important today. Let's argue for an appropriate calling for government and let's be supportive of government fulfilling that calling, including paying appropriate taxes. Alberta has the opportunity with its current financial resources to show how a government, in concert with all parts of society, can pursue *real prosperity*, justice and well-being for all. Alberta could be a real leader among all the provinces and with the federal government to undertake some serious exploration of the public justice role of governments.

Alberta could begin to frame economic debate not about the lowest possible taxes, highest competitive markets or highest economic growth, but instead about how integral social and environmental well-being is to economic decision-making and how we can take seriously *oikonomia* as Mark Anielski put it, making use of measurements like the Genuine Progress Indicators to guide government policy development.

With this approach, government can truly begin to a servant to do good.

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