

Life as a Problem

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It is naïve to think every problem has a government solution. But, if government is going to be in the solution business, then everyone's problems are going to be its problems—even if they have to be redefined to fit.

If you start with the proposition that life is a problem that requires a solution, then the more governments become involved in seeking solutions to 'the problem', the more governments will be blamed for the problem. This 'blaming the government' now threatens the viability of governing.

In discussions with teachers in the 1970s, I recall their frequent use of the word 'cope'. Any issue became a problem with which they had to cope. The solution to the issue was usually an intervention by the government in the form of funding, to the schools or the teachers, or by way of curriculum changes. How those teachers wish they could go back and start again!

So it is with much of government provision and decision-making. A Ph.D. student interviewed me recently on accountability in government, the inference being there wasn't enough of it. I took her through the changes in administrative law in the last twenty years, and its application to government decisions.

For example, the veteran applying for a disability pension once received a one-off decision by a delegate of the government, appealable at law, but to all intents and purposes final. The system changed so that the veteran had a hearing before a medical tribunal, itself an appeal from the decision of a delegate, and on the merits appealable to a higher tribunal, and on a point of law to the Federal Court. Then the system shifted to a non-medical board with one member nominated by the veteran's organization, usually the RSL. Get the picture? The digger hardly ever lost.

The distinction between the deserving digger and the undeserving had by now been obliterated. The obliteration of this distinction in the name of fairness did not strike everyone as fair. My favourite story is of the war widow accompanying her friend in a Commonwealth car, a recent widow who complained about the Department of Veterans' Affairs treatment of her husband. The first war widow responded to the complainant derisively, 'I'm the real war widow, my husband died in the war!' These distinctions are real, and when gov-

ernments destroy them people can react in such a way that it becomes more difficult to make the next intervention.

I am not sure if the Ph.D. student made the connection between that change and accountability. A senior academic dismissed my illustration as having little to do with accountability. Perhaps she was right; the government had in some ways become less accountable to the taxpayer by losing its ability to distinguish a real claim from a pretend one. The more governments seek to blur them in the name of equity for the sake of peace, or electoral gain, the less manageable the system becomes.

Another true story: a newly appointed member of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal—which has the equivalent role of the Veterans' tribunal—was greeted at her first case with the remark from another member: 'Well, how do we get this one up?' Not, 'What are the facts in this case and how should we apply the law?', but 'How do we deny the government's intention and pay the people we regard as deserving?'

Perhaps it is not the crude level of expenditure that should excite those who worry about the size of government, but the purposes for which that expenditure is used. For example, I wrote a recent article about the behaviour of a single mother, which I'm sure in the view of most people was appalling. It read:

On a bright and sunny day, at a time when I was a Minister in the Labor government of Prime Minister Paul Keating, I walked from my electorate office to buy a pie for lunch. As I walked by the local pub I observed two women in their mid-to-late twenties leaving the pub. One called out to a friend, a mother of similar age, and crossing the road with a young girl in hand. 'How you goin'?', to which the friend replied in a very loud voice, 'The boyfriend's pissed off; but it's okay, I'm fucking the ex!'

I was shocked, and saddened and concerned. Why so shocked? The language was not new to me, I am no prude. There was a link between me and the mother, above

and beyond the concerns of observing poor behaviour from an adult, especially in front of a child. I am a taxpayer and she was a beneficiary.

Reflect for a moment on the myriad implications of that relationship. Did the taxpayer have a right to pass judgement on the behaviour of the beneficiary? Did her behaviour make her undeserving of the assistance? What are her rights to receive that assistance? What are the taxpayer's rights to expect a 'good result' from that same assistance? What would constitute a good result?

My point was to challenge the view that government benefits are 'as of right'. Payments from the taxpayer are made on the basis of taxpayer consent, and it is assumed that the benefit would be put to good use. Right on cue, the National Council for the Single Mother and Their Children chimed in with an attack on my argument, and a defence of the woman on the basis of her contribution as a taxpayer, and my undoubted ability to pay her way. They did not treat the person as an individual or acknowledge that she may have had some responsibility to the taxpayer who was, in effect, raising her child. The refusal to acknowledge this point leaves a very large hole in the rationale for the welfare state. The more we leave the consent of the taxpayer out of the question of who is to have use of public resources, the more strongly they are likely to react. Then life for government becomes a problem.



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