

## **American Principles of Self-Government for the Layman**

By Michael F. Reber

### **Introduction**

Ever since the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, our Forefathers set forth to create a society based in part upon a virtuous life. A society that afforded to each individual the opportunity to develop to his fullest potential as a mature being and to govern his own affairs in relationship to the community of which he was a member. This is the essence of self-government, and more specifically, self-government of an American Republic. As the Revolutionary Convention of 1774 asserts in *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, “Our ancestors...possessed a right which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice, has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations, and of there establishing new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them shall seem most likely to promote public happiness.”

### **Roots of Self-Government**

*A Summary View* helps present a clearer picture of the roots of American principles of self-government. The pilgrims believed that one of the purposes of government is “distributive justice,” the giving to each member his *due* in accordance with his nature and vocation. This is in direct opposition to Thomas Hobbes in *On the Citizen* and John Locke in *Two Treatises of Government* who contend that the purpose of government is to protect people from themselves because they cannot be trusted to do good toward each other. Like our ancestors, Americans today should re-establish their communities upon the principle of *eros*—the love for oneself to become the best that one can possibly

become as a mature individual as well as the love for one's fellows to actualize their true potentials as mature members of society. As Thomas Jefferson writes in a letter to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814, "nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses."

Eros leads the way toward three aspects of justice that give rise to self-governance in the individual and the community. The first kind is commutative justice. It means that each person respects the rights of others. The second aspect of justice is legal justice. It establishes within each of us a duty to the sustenance of community. The third kind is distributive justice. It regulates what the community owes to its members in accordance with their individual natures and vocations.

## **Purpose of Government**

Within the tripartite realm of justice, three purposes of government can be elicited. In *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms, July 1775*, the Second Continental Congress proclaims that first and foremost "Government was instituted to promote the Welfare of Mankind, and ought to be administered for the Attainment of that End." The second purpose of government is to secure those liberties that enable people's initiatives toward enhancing their lives, as Jefferson states, "a right which nature has given to all." But where individuals are unable to provide for those non-self-suppliable conditions that help them to actualize their inherent potentials, government has the duty to provide them, such as public education.

## **American Principles of Self-Government**

For simplicity purposes, I have revised the perennial thought on self-government as developed by key thinkers such as Aristotle, Thomas Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stewart Mill, and John Dewey into a manageable set of four principles and their conditions for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### PRINCIPLES

First Principle: *Government closest to the people is government best for the people!*

For centuries humanity has struggled to ensure liberty and freedom. The establishment of a government that is direct, participatory, and when needed, representative is the surest bulwark against tyrannical aggression. Using advanced technologies such as the Internet, electronic town halls can be created to assist members in generative dialogue on community issues. Unlike the old fashion town hall that provides a venue for a few people to discuss a problem on a certain day, an electronic town hall assists a multitude of people to address asynchronously an issue in a generative manner before a physical meeting day. This is the core of the first principle of self-government for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Second Principle: *An enlightened electorate enlightens!*

A well-disciplined and trained mind is the key toward self-reliance and governance in the individual. As an American Republic, our democracy is dependent upon an enlightened electorate. Every American has a right and an obligation to control his own mind, to educate himself in his own fashion, and to have access to those non-self-suppliable conditions that assist him in becoming a self-directed citizen. As a

right, government has a responsibility to protect individual thought. As an obligation, each member must do his utmost for himself and his fellows to govern his own affairs and not have the State do it for him.

Third Principle: *Equity is most equitable when it's horizontal!*

Two layers of horizontal equity direct the provision of non-self-suppliable conditions by the government: 1) Taxpayer Horizontal Equity (THE) and 2) Public Service Horizontal Equity (PSHE). THE ensures that each person's financial contribution to the community is in accordance with his capacity to pay, his own development, and the development of his fellows. THE directs the way in which taxation is implemented. Thus, property, income, and estate taxes are an impediment to self-government and should not be applied. For a purely republican form of government, I argue that consumption or value-added taxes (VATs) and bonds be used to fund public services and that state constitutions incorporate amendments to ensure THE and PSHE.

PSHE regulates the use of public services. An example of PSHE is the Vermont Constitution of 1777. In Chapter I, Article 7, a common benefits clause guarantees that all people have equal access and opportunities to non-self-suppliable conditions that are provided by the state: "Government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit...of the people, nation, or community, and not for the particular emolument or advantage of any single person, family, or set of persons." Furthermore, Chapter II, Section 40, which in today's Vermont Constitution is Chapter II, Section 68, establishes that "Laws for the encouragement of virtue and prevention of vice and immorality ought to be constantly kept in force, and duly executed; and a competent number of schools

ought to be maintained in each town.” The requirement that each town in the state “ought” to have a school exemplifies the necessity of the non-self-suppliable condition of education.

Fourth Principle: *Sustain not what is might, but what is right!*

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century communities will need to discover ways in which to maintain sustainability between the four spheres of society: political, cultural, economic, and environmental. *Social Sustainability* is the condition by which society maintains the complementarity and congeniality of personal excellences between its members that in turn transforms the society from one generation to the next. The political sphere is government and it should do those things that private and civil associations are unable to do, such as levy taxes, incarcerate criminals, declare war, and protect civil liberties and private property. The cultural sphere is those public institutions that the political body has established in order to support culture, such as schools, and those private and civil associations that are created via voluntary association. It has an obligation to perform communal tasks necessary for sustaining the society. The economic sphere is the “market,” and mature individuals guide it through a set of virtues that the community has agreed upon as worthy of emulating, “cardinal virtues,” as well as different classes of virtue for each person’s vocation, “distributive virtues.” The environmental sphere is the natural environs, and it is here that sustainability can be understood best. Humanity has the capacity to live in a world without violence to itself and to nature. As human beings, we have been charged as caretakers of the planet. Therefore, guided by virtue, each generation should strive to be better than the one that preceded it; and this is the meaning of “sustaining what is right over what is might.”

## CONDITIONS

At least five conditions are required in order to implement self-government. These are listed as follows.

First Condition: *Only mature individuals can be entrusted to govern the affairs of others.*

In a letter to John Adams, December 10, 1819, Jefferson writes, “a pure republic is a state of society in which every member, of mature and sound mind, has an equal right of participation, personally in the direction of the affairs of society.” Maturity here does not mean being of a certain age that society declares as adulthood, but being an adult who has identified his personhood and lives his life in accordance with it as well as in congeniality with his community. As Americans, we have witnessed time and again the scandals that have rocked our institutions, from the church parish to Wall Street. It is essential that communities establish an implicit standard for governance in order to sustain self-government. Only those individuals who are capable of governing their own affairs should be entrusted to govern the affairs of community. I am not saying to create an elitist class with rights and privileges above the rest or to employ a litmus test for those who wish to serve. I am saying that those persons who are recognized as “mature” individuals whose lives are worthy of emulating deserve to be leaders of their community.

Second Condition: *Governance operates in accordance with the Principle of Equal Consideration and the Principle of Equality.*

Jefferson in a letter to Joseph C. Cabell, February 2, 1816 contends that “the way to have good and safe government, is not to trust it all to one, but to divide it among the many, *distributing to every one exactly the function he is competent to*” [italics added]. This means that each mature individual is “considered” to be sufficiently well qualified to govern and to participate in collective decision making, but none are considered better qualified than the rest that a single person be entrusted to make the collective and binding decisions. An example of this is Capitol Hill. Once a person is elected to Congress, he is equal in his capacity to govern the affairs of the nation, but no single senator or representative makes the binding decisions. Furthermore, his equality is a distributive equality. His peers decide the way in which he can govern best in Congress, such as the tradition of distributing committee assignments.

Third Condition: *Governance is an Obligation; it is neither a Right nor a Compact.*

Unlike Hobbes and Locke who argue that governance is a compact entered into agreement or a right guaranteed to all persons, I declare that it is an obligation. As a right, Hobbes and Locke are implying that the mature person can choose whether or not to participate in governance. A right asks very little in terms of full participation in the community. However, an obligation requires the very best of all mature people. They not only have an obligation to themselves and their families, but to the greater community.

Fourth Condition: *Self-government lives in the light of the virtues.*

As the Vermont Constitution of 1777 establishes, “Laws for the encouragement of virtue and prevention of vice and immorality *ought* to be constantly kept in force, and duly executed” [italics added]. The significant point of this clause is in the usage of “ought” instead of “should.” “Ought” carries with it an obligation. It in no way brushes aside the role that the virtues play in maintaining a civil society. Furthermore, in achieving the “cardinal virtues” of one’s community, a person commits himself to a set of “distributive virtues” of his vocation. Within this framework, citizenship is membership in governance and service to community through vocation.

Fifth Condition: *Government should be thought of as a modern “metrioi.”*

In his letter to James Madison, December 20, 1787, Jefferson writes about his disapproval of the US Constitution’s “abandonment in every instance of the necessity of rotation in office, and most particularly in the case of the President” since “Experience concurs with reason in concluding that the first magistrate will always be re-elected if the Constitution permits it.” In Jefferson’s scheme of a purely republican form of government, term limits is essential to maintaining the *polis*. This idea is based upon the ancient Greek notion of a *metrioi*, which is a community of “middling people” who think of themselves as a group of restrained, sensible individuals who are all of the same mind, *homonía*, and whose bonds are kept together through brotherly love, *philia*. Each is alike in loving the greater good but qualitatively different in the way each does so. Each is equal in his ability to govern in the collective affairs of State, but none so better as to make all the binding decisions for the entire community. Thus, “term limits” is necessary in order to maintain the sustainability of the *polis*.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, the principles of self-government that I have proposed are in alignment with the basic principles of government and “harmonizing sentiments” of the Founding Fathers. Furthermore, the actualization of these principles can be acquired best through *eros* and a set of cardinal and distributive virtues. Only then will we have created an American Republic of which our ancestors would be truly proud.

## **About the Author**

Michael Reber is Co-chairman of the St. Louis based Jeffersonian Coalition. He is currently an adjunct professor at St. Louis Community College. He received his Ph.D. in Education and Institutional Transformation from The International University Asia-Pacific Centers, Kyoto, Japan and Honolulu, Hawaii in February 2003.

To contact the author, please send all correspondence to:

Michael Reber

St. Louis Community College

Forest Park Campus

Humanities and Social Science

5600 Oakland Avenue

St. Louis, MO 63110-1393

michaelreber@yahoo.com